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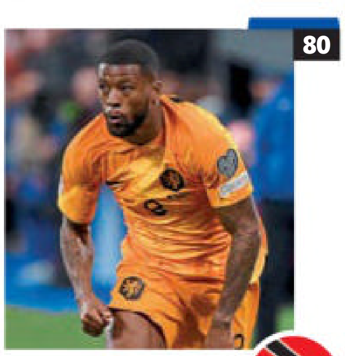

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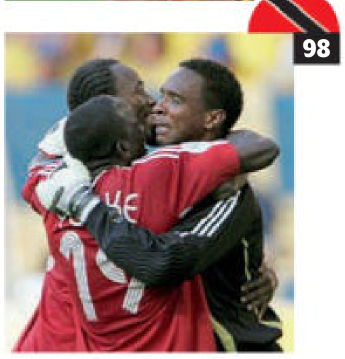

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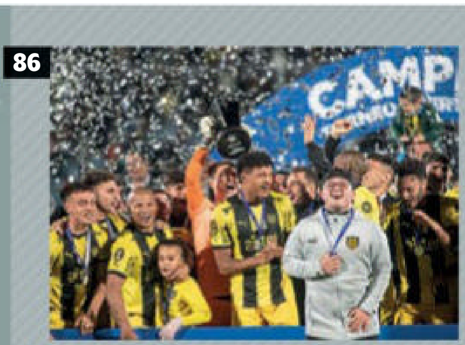

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The global game caught on camera

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Argentina...an aerial view of the Monumental Stadium, Buenos Aires, ahead of the *Superclasico* between River Plate and Boca Juniors

England...Erling Haaland is given a guard of honour by his Manchester City team-mates after scoring a record-breaking 35th Premier League goal of the season, surpassing the previous record-tallies of Alan Shearer and Andy Cole

Italy...Internazionale fans hold up a tifo for their team ahead of the Champions League semi-final with Milan

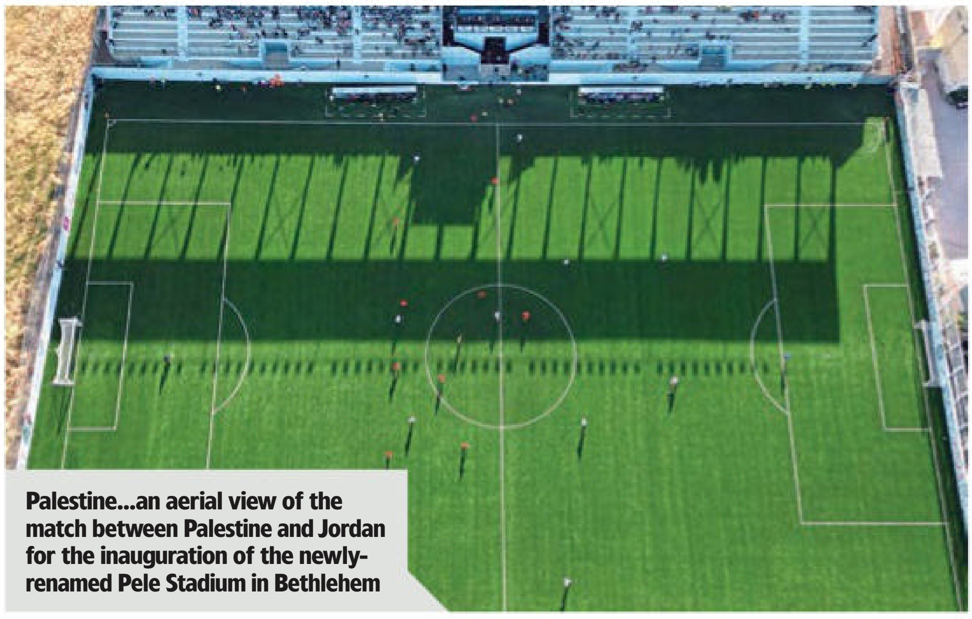
Netherlands...Feyenoord fans gather in the street as their team parades the Eredivisie trophy

Italy…a Napoli fan celebrates his team winning their first *Scudetto* since 1990

Spain…Barcelona are chased from the pitch after celebrating winning the La Liga title at the home of local rivals Espanyol

Netherlands…Groningen v Ajax is abandoned after fireworks are set off in the stands and fans storm onto the pitch in protest against the hosts' owners following their relegation

Argentina...fighting breaks out at the end of the *Superclasico* between River Plate and Boca Juniors. In total, six red cards were shown after River scored a stoppage-time penalty



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FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR

Football is dead, long live football.

As the European season draws to a close and players and managers across the continent pack their suitcases for a summer break, you could be mistaken for thinking that, with no World Cup or European Championship on the immediate horizon, there won't be much going on over the coming months.

Yet the relentless football machine ploughs on and, as well as reflecting on some of the standout stories from the 2022-23 season, we're looking ahead to another summer of international action in this issue. With CONCACAF's biggest names meeting in the United States and Canada for the Gold Cup, the four UEFA Nations League finalists heading to the Netherlands, and the stars of tomorrow taking part in the European U19 and U21 Championships, there's plenty to get excited about this summer.

> You could be mistaken for thinking that… there won't be much going on over the coming months. Yet the relentless football machine ploughs on

Of course, the main attraction is the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand, which kicks off in July. Glenn Moore has taken an early look at some of the biggest stars that could light up the tournament, with a full preview of the finals to follow in next month's issue.

Indeed, our Summer 2023 edition will be a bumper issue, wrapping up all of Europe's major leagues, plus the Champions League, Europa League and Europa Conference League finals, as well as a deep dive into the finals Down Under. Don't miss it.

Jamie Evans, Assistant Editor

Banned... Brentford striker Ivan Toney

ENGLAND

Eight-month ban for Toney

Brentford striker Ivan Toney will be absent for the rest of the calendar year after receiving an eight-month ban for breaching Football Association betting rules.

The 27-year-old was charged with 262 separate breaches between February 2017 and January 2021, during which time he played for Scunthorpe United, Wigan Athletic, Peterborough United and Brentford.

The verdict brings to an end a long saga, with the charges brought against him in November and December 2022. Toney accepted 232 breaches – with the FA subsequently withdrawing 30 – and spent the latter half of the season waiting for the independent Regulatory Commission to deliver its verdict. Despite the delay, he still ended the season with an impressive 20 Premier League goals.

The one-cap England forward will be allowed to play again on January 17, 2024, but can train with the Bees from September 17.

UNITED STATES

MLS's 30th team

Californian city San Diego has won the race to be the home of the 30th franchise in Major League Soccer, after an announcement by the league's commissioner Don Garber.

The club's owners – including Egyptian billionaire Mohamed Mansour and the owner of the Right To Dream academy, which is based in Ghana and owns Danish side Nordsjaelland – paid a reported fee of nearly $500 million to join.

The club will play its home games

> "It is our moral and legal obligation not to undersell the FIFA Women's World Cup. Therefore, should the offers continue not to be fair, we will be forced not to broadcast…into the 'big five' European countries"

FIFA president Gianni Infantino threatens broadcasters with a TV blackout of this year's Women's World Cup

at the newly-built, 35,000-seater Snapdragon Stadium, which also hosts the women's team San Diego Wave.

Reaching 30 teams has long been seen as the target for MLS, and San Diego's arrival could see an end to the league's expansion – at least for the time being.

"I don't think sitting here today that we have any plan in the near future to go beyond 30 teams," said Garber. "Who knows what the future looks like after [the 2026 World Cup], but nothing in the immediate future for sure."

UEFA

Ceferin refuses to rule out American Champions League final

UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin has admitted "it's possible" that future Champions League finals could take place in the United States.

Speaking to US podcast *Men In Blazers*, the Slovenian said "we have started to discuss" the idea of moving UEFA's biggest showpiece event across the Atlantic. "This year [the final] is in Istanbul, 2024 is London and 2025 is Munich and after that, let's see," he said.

Ceferin also went on to discuss the topic of a salary cap for clubs across Europe, claiming that "everyone agrees" with the principle. "Big clubs, small clubs, state-owned clubs, billionaire-owned clubs, everybody agrees," he said.

"If the budgets go sky-high then our competitive balance is a problem. It's not about the owners, it's about the value of the competition.

"But it has to be a collective agreement – every league and UEFA. Because if we do it and the other leagues don't, then it doesn't make sense.

"I hope it can be made as soon as possible."

UEFA president… Aleksander Ceferin

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month…

Chelsea star …Sam Kerr

1

Chelsea striker Sam Kerr became the first woman to win the Football Writers' Association Player of the Year award in successive years.

82%

Vote share that Manchester City striker Erling Haaland took in claiming the Men's FWA award.

€0

Price of some tickets at home games for Fortuna Dusseldorf next season after the German side announced plans to offer free tickets at all of their future home games.

£5bn

Approximate value of the latest bid placed for Manchester United by Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani.

1

French Cups won by Toulouse after they stunned Nantes 5-1 in this year's final to lift the trophy for the first time in their history.

20

Copas del Rey won by Real Madrid after they beat Osasuna 2-1 in the final of the 2022-23 edition.

10

Premier League London derbies won by Arsenal in the 2022-23 season – the first team ever to win as many in a single league campaign.

3

African nations – Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya – that have combined with a joint-bid to host the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations finals. Egypt, Algeria and Botswana have also registered their interest in hosting the tournament.

6

Total number of European finals that Jose Mourinho has reached after getting to this year's Europa League showpiece with Roma.

1

Domestic league titles claimed by Al Khaldiya after they won the Bahraini Premier League title for the first time in their history.

£108.7m

Cristiano Ronaldo's earnings over the past 12 months making him – according to *Forbes* – the world's highest-paid athlete.

191

Champions League games managed by Carlo Ancelotti, overtaking Alex Ferguson's record as the coach with the most games in charge.

15

Number of times Persepolis have been crowned champions of Iran after winning this season's Persian Gulf Pro League.

£935m

Value of the EFL's new five-year broadcasting deal with Sky Sports, which will see more than 1,000 matches broadcast per season.

10

Serie A points that Juventus have been docked following a new hearing into their past transfer dealings. The club's original 15-point deduction was reduced after being re-examined.

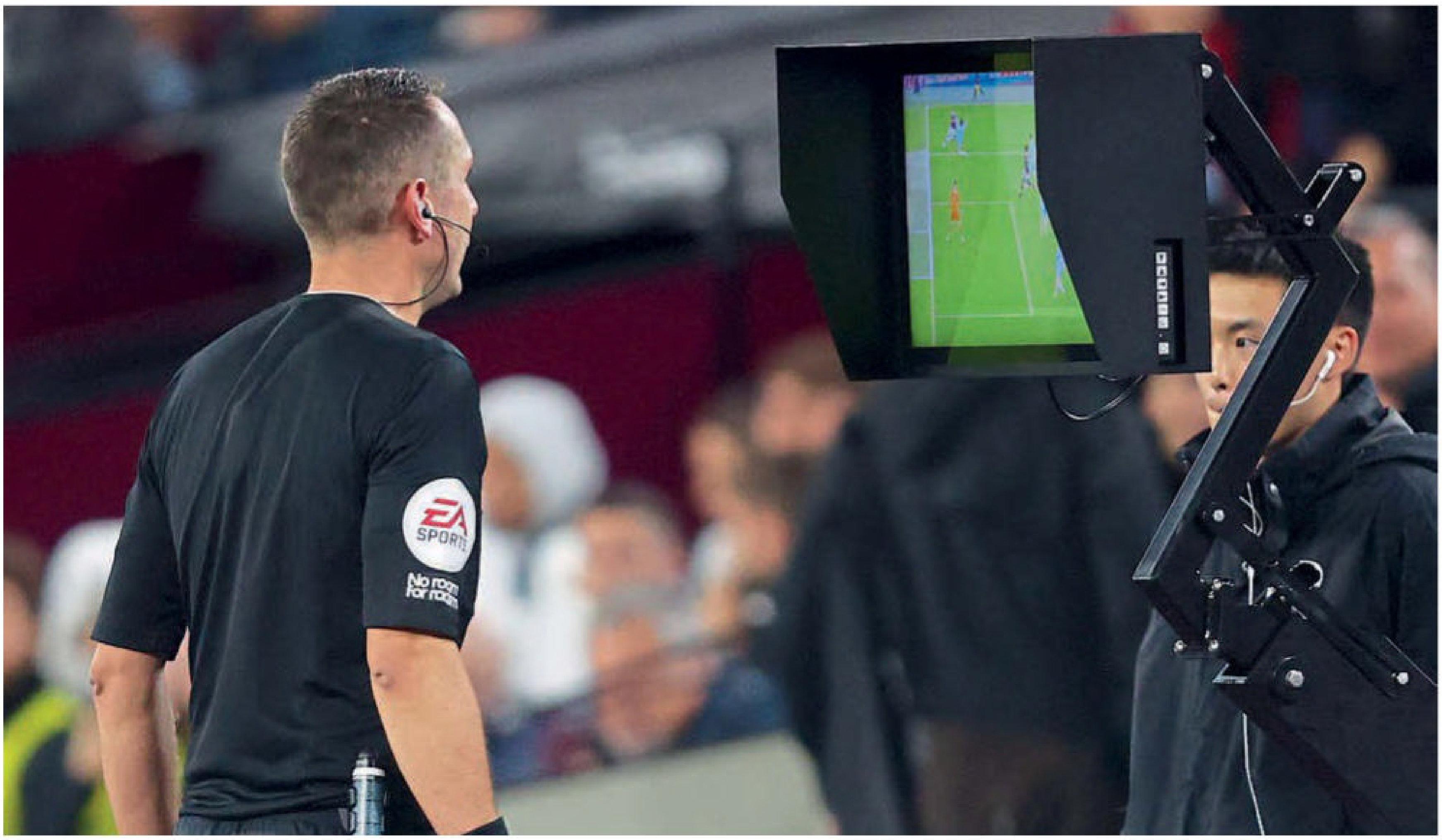
24

Minutes that Paul Pogba's comeback lasted, with the Juventus midfielder subbed less than half an hour into his first start in over a year.

Agony… Paul Pogba

Keir
RADNEDGE
THE INSIDER

VAR has created as many problems as it solves



VAR…referee David Coote checks the monitor during West Ham United v Bournemouth

VAR is football's Frankenstein Monster: benign and passive on being aroused for the World Cup finals in 2018 but now outgrowing its welcome and bursting its chains. No one quite knows how to control it.

Video assistance has also provided one more stick with which referees can be flayed in public by social-media-empowered managers, players, media and fans.

No chance that FIFA – whether president Gianni Infantino or referee bosses Pierluigi Collina and Massimo Busacca – would admit to the horse having bolted and left them only with the empty reins. Perish the thought; problems at league level are nothing to do with FIFA or the IFAB lawmakers, merely a matter of occasional misunderstanding and/or incompetence.

A decade ago, Michel Platini, when in his pomp as UEFA president, had told this writer he opposed goal-line technology because "it will lead to a slippery slope for technology spoiling the game." He may now permit himself a wry smile of Schadenfreude.

Yet GLT was approved by the law-making IFAB in time for the 2014 World Cup finals. No one questions it now. Operational simplicity is the key: the alert of the ball crossing the line hits the referee's wrist within a second.

A near-instantaneous signal was the demand of then-president Sepp Blatter when he abandoned his opposition to GLT after Frank Lampard's phantom goal against Germany in the second round of the 2010 World Cup in Bloemfontein. Is something similar the answer with VAR?

> Above all, VAR's credibility remains compromised by the vexed questions of handball and offside

Blatter, had he still been on his throne, might have insisted on a timing factor when VAR was in development phase. Instead he was long gone by 2018 and no one else had thought of it in the servile rush to delight Infantino at the World Cup in Russia.

By the end of the tournament, Infantino, Collina and Busacca were all smiles. VAR had helped overturn 17 out of 20 "wrong decisions" and was judged a triumph. In the final itself Argentinian ref Nestor Pitana made history by checking the pitch-side screen before awarding France a crucial penalty against Croatia.

VAR was subsequently devolved to the major leagues with predictable teething troubles. However none appear to struggle as distractingly as the English Premier League.

Last autumn Howard Webb arrived home, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, from Major League Soccer in the home of sports technology that is the United States, to take a key role at Professional Game Match Officials Limited (PGMOL). He could hardly have expected that being chief refereeing officer would involve so many apologies for incorrect decisions conjured up by match referees and their VAR overseers.

In the old days (i.e. before the Premier League and Sky TV) it was enough for a faceless bureaucrat to deflect questions and/or complaints with the old adage, "decisions even themselves out over a season."

But that was then. Now the referee is no longer the indistinguishable man in black: referee rulings, whether right or wrong, now attract fearsome flares of indignation across social media.

One recent contentious match was Tottenham's Premier League clash with Brighton in April. Brighton felt they had been let down several times by referee Stuart Attwell and his VAR support back in Stockley Park, with many pundits in agreement that the Seagulls should have been awarded a clear penalty and not had two of their "goals" chalked off.

Even the simple things can baffle. Tottenham again, in their 3-1 win over Nottingham Forest, providing a case in point. Richarlison "scored" in the opening exchanges but three minutes passed on the stadium clock before the VAR check denied him a goal. Yet referee Craig Pawson allowed only two minutes stoppage time at the end of the half. What happened to the other minute?

Above all, VAR's credibility remains compromised by the vexed questions of handball and offside.

Law 12 (fouls and misconduct) pinpoints an infringement when players "deliberately touch the ball with their hand/arm." Traditionally the referee had the responsibility of deciding whether a handball was intentional or accidental. IFAB sought to impose some clarity by ruling that anything outside the natural body silhouette should be considered intentional because the onus is on the player who "takes a risk".

Yet can a high-speed ricochet be considered deliberate?

Consider the unfortunate penalty conceded by Uruguay's Jose Maria Gimenez in their defeat by Portugal at the World Cup in Qatar. He was judged guilty because a live ball struck the arm he was putting down, as a natural reflex, to help break his fall. Yet a similar incident occurred in the Premier League in April when Liverpool midfielder Thiago handled when breaking his fall against West Ham. A penalty wasn't given.

Handball was a major topic at the first meeting of what UEFA calls its "eminent" expert advisory board, a European equivalent to Infantino's FIFA Legends sideshow. Germany's new national team director Rudi Voller went straight to the point in attacking "developments that are a thorn in the side of most fans and those involved worldwide." He said: "The interpretation of the handball rule is a core issue." The panel suggested no handball for a ricochet off a player's own body and that only a deliberate handball should risk a red card.

VAR has reduced the number of human errors due to the challenges of speed of action and unfortunate positioning. But when the system fails to match expectation then errors are magnified almost through outrage.

Offside will also remain a subject of frustration, whatever width the lines of judgement. A goal can be denied because of an offside call against a player's armpit or nose or knee – correctly so, according to the letter of Law 11. The wording was unchallenged until VAR came along; until then, problems only arose from the inability of a linesman to simultaneously assess the moment of delivery of the ball and the general body placement of the attacker.

One proposed solution would see a restriction of offside rulings to a player's feet, on the basis that this is, after all, football.

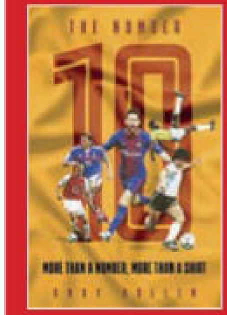
The fault line between VAR and the laws of the game is that the VAR and match referee can have honestly-held different opinions and, literally, see the action from different angles. So do not expect clarity any time soon. VAR does not provide the certainty of goal-line technology and never can while human beings take the ultimate decision.

One final frustration concerns the notorious VAR time lapse. Surely two minutes is long enough to expect players and fans to wait. Anything more and an incident can hardly be considered "clear and obvious."

The soul of the game of association football is defined by its identity as a contest of perpetual motion. Other sports embrace their stops and starts. Football is all about the action; VAR should be brought back into line.

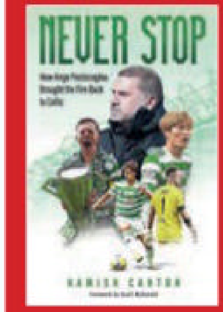
Contentious...Uruguay's Jose Maria Gimenez concedes a penalty against Portugal at the World Cup

BOOKS THIS MONTH



THE NUMBER TEN
By Andy Bollen (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

It's merely material and thread, yet the number ten jersey represents so much more than football. Those wearing it carry the weight of expectation for club and country. From Puskas to Pele, Maradona to Messi, Andy Bollen explores how their will to win at all costs comes from their desire to overcome adversity – escape poverty, rejection or horrendous injury. This is the story of the players who elevated the number ten to iconic status.



NEVER STOP
By Hamish Carton (Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

Never Stop is the story of how manager Ange Postecoglou took Celtic from the edge of despair to the UEFA Champions League, via a domestic double, in his debut season. The Australian arrived in Glasgow with virtually no reputation on this side of the world, but through his compelling media appearances, enthralling style of football and winning habit, Postecoglou soon became one of the most iconic Celtic managers since the legendary Jock Stein.

Jonathan WILSON

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Comparing Pep with Mikel

Adversaries…the two coaches patrol the touchline during Manchester City's win over Arsenal

In 1999, a week before the Spanish Super Cup, Mikel Arteta played his only game for Barcelona's first team, coming off the substitutes' bench in a 2-1 friendly defeat to Hertha Berlin. He was only 17, and his performance seems to have been memorable for nobody but him and his immediate circle. But it is telling that he grew up amid one of the greatest concatenations of coaching talent the world has known. The manager was Louis van Gaal. His assistants were Jose Mourinho and Ronald Koeman. Luis Enrique was in the squad. And the player he replaced at half-time was Pep Guardiola.

The influence of that side on Arteta was clearly profound. He still fundamentally believes in the Barcelona principles of 4-3-3, possession football and a high press. Arteta's career at Barcelona never quite worked out and he soon moved on to Paris Saint-Germain on loan (where he became good friends with Mauricio Pochettino) and then Rangers. He and Guardiola stayed in touch and, in 2012, when Barca played Chelsea in the Champions League semi-final, Guardiola rang Arteta, then an Arsenal player, for advice. Barca lost, but Guardiola was so impressed with Arteta's tactical breakdown that he offered to make him his assistant at some later date.

> There is a sense…that Arteta is a monster that Guardiola has created

Arteta is not a purist in the way Guardiola is. He was never steeped in Barcelona in quite the same way, moving there at the age of 15 from San Sebastian, an area steeped in its own coaching traditions. He has had plenty of external influences as well, notably Arsene Wenger and Pochettino, from whom he has absorbed many of the lessons taught by Marcelo Bielsa at Newell's Old Boys in the early 1990s. When his playing career came to an end in 2016, Arteta essentially had a choice of linking up with one of Wenger, Pochettino or Guardiola.

He went with Guardiola, who was just leaving Bayern Munich to move to Manchester City and needed an assistant with experience of the Premier League. Even at Arsenal it had been obvious Arteta analysed the game and had leadership qualities far in excess of any other player, so much so that he was nicknamed "Coach." That was clearly a huge part of his evolution, and there is a sense, particularly given the sales of Oleksandr Zinchenko and Gabriel Jesus to Arsenal, that Arteta is a monster that Guardiola has created.

Arteta is no slavish disciple, though, intent on pursuing a philosophy come what may. "You can have an idea of a system, but you need to be able to transform it depending on the players you have – how much pace you have up front, how technical your team is, what types of risk you can take and whether your players are ready to take those risks," he explained. "It's important to analyse your players because you can't always play the same way. There have to be different details and changes in how you approach

Former assistant …Arteta served under Guardiola for three years

things, and you have to look at how you can hurt whoever you are playing against. Is there something they don't like to do? If so, we're going to make them do plenty of it."

Like Guardiola, Arteta believes in attacking with pace in wide areas; like Guardiola, Arteta likes his midfield three to feature a metronomic passer who can destroy opposition attacks, a creator and a player to link the two; like Guardiola, Arteta seems to have moved on from the idea of full-backs as essentially auxiliary attackers constantly on the overlap, instead having one stay deep while the other tucks into midfield.

But clearly there are differences, which in part may be explained by the difference in the squads at their disposal. Guardiola has far greater depth and that has allowed him far more variety, sometimes going with what is effectively a front two with Julian Alvarez joining Haaland in a strike pairing, and occasionally deploying a back three.

The biggest difference, though, is at centre-forward. Gabriel Jesus has had a fine season, and has clearly improved Arsenal, but he is a vestige of the old City style. Haaland has changed that. Early in the campaign there was some awkwardness as City adapted to a player who needed the ball played forward quickly, surrendering some of the control that had always been a Guardiola hallmark. The tension between the two methods has seemingly proved creative.

Arsenal, meanwhile, with Jesus up top, are like an earlier version of City. If that sounds pejorative, it shouldn't: only one club in the world has Haaland. There will be questions, rightly, about how Arsenal let those two two-goal leads slip against Liverpool and West Ham, the start against Southampton, and sobering defeats to Brighton and Nottingham Forest, but the fact is that Arsenal, with a coach who shares many principles with City, challenged them far closer than could reasonably be expected given their respective squads.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Out of retirement ...Ailton in a legends game last year

1 ROLLING BACK THE YEARS

Remember Ailton? The Brazilian striker was the inspiration behind Werder Bremen's stunning Bundesliga title triumph in 2003-04, scoring 28 goals, before later retiring in his home country in 2011. Well, now he's back, coming out of retirement at the age of 49 to play in the ninth tier of German football for TSV Bassum III, a club based some 30km from Bremen. In his first game, he attracted a bumper crowd of 881 fans and notched the equaliser in a 2-2 draw for the hosts. "You saw it, he hasn't forgotten anything," said his manager, with the man himself adding: "Maybe I'll play again. I had a lot of fun today."

2 INSTAGRAM ASSISTED

Arsenal and Manchester City fans will be surprised to learn that their former left-back Gael Clichy – who scored just five times in 14 years in England – recently notched a stunning goal from the halfway line for Servette. Afterwards, the Frenchman revealed that he owed the assist to one of the Swiss club's fans: "I received a message on Instagram from a Servette fan, who told me that the goalkeeper tends to be quite advanced, and that stuck in my thoughts," he said, before later revealing a screenshot of the message. "It's fine if you don't see this, but the opposing goalkeeper tonight has a tendency to be a bit high up the pitch," it read. Clichy duly followed the advice, pouncing on a loose ball and firing home from just inside Sion's half.

3 CELEBRATE IN STYLE

Dawley Town marked their promotion from the Shropshire County Premier Division in some style. With a twist on the usual open-top bus tour of the local town, the players instead climbed aboard the back of a scaffolding lorry. The celebrations were well deserved, with the team winning the league without losing a game – but there was a twist in the tale. With the club's ground not meeting the standards of the league above, they were barred from promotion. Manager Tom White said that the team were "not really that downbeat" and looking forward to next season. "Who knows, we could go two seasons unbeaten."

4 CRUEL "BLOW"

In Real Valladolid's recent clash with Sevilla, the referee decided to blow up for half-time just as Sergio Escudero's rocket shot was whistling its way into the back of the net. Celebrations were immediately cut short for the understandably incandescent hosts, who were later warned over their conduct. The club, owned by Brazilian Ronaldo, went on to lose the game 3-0, leaving them in real danger of relegation.

5 FALL FROM GRACE

Adrian Mihalcea will be a familiar name to players of *Championship Manager* in the early 2000s. Once touted as one of the world's best wonderkids, these days the Romanian is managing Gloria Buzau and making headlines for all the wrong reasons. The 47-year-old saw red in his side's recent second-tier clash for a bizarre and, frankly, embarrassing dive on the touchline as a player brushed against him.

6 EDGY ANNOUNCEMENT

The award for the most juvenile announcement of the season goes to Scottish Championship side Raith Rovers, who recently revealed that defender Liam Dick had signed a new deal with a tweet titled: "Dick extension." Unsurprisingly, it led to a spate of innuendo-filled replies from fans.

New deal...Raith Rovers' Liam Dick

Jim
HOLDEN
AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Written in the stars: Napoli's stunning *Scudetto*

Giant murals of Diego Maradona adorn the streets of Naples, a symbol of the intense passion the city feels for its team and its eternal hero. The shadow of Maradona follows everywhere you care to go, a shadow which also hung over the two most thrilling stories of the 2022-23 football season.

First, Argentina won their first World Cup since the genius of Maradona in 1986, then Napoli captured the Serie A title after 33 long years of waiting – their first without Maradona in the side. Maybe it was all written in the stars.

Certainly, there has been magic in the Neapolitan air for many months, an endless mood of joy as Napoli coasted to glory. It was obvious from ten matches out that they would become Italian champions; flags hung from windows day and night, colours were flaunted with pride and cars wildly decorated. Napoli were so good they simply could not fail.

The joy was widely shared. One reason was their exhilarating style of play, an all-action desire to attack and to entertain. They encouraged the daring, throwback, dribbling, socks-down panache of unheralded Georgian winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, who quickly earned the nickname "Kvaradona". They unleashed a dynamic striker in mask-wearing Victor Osimhen. It was a stark contrast to the defensive tactics of Juventus and Roma, as well as the functionality of Milan and Inter.

Equally, if not more important, another reason for celebration was geography. This was only the fourth time in the history of Italian football that the *Scudetto* was claimed by a club based in the south of the country. Cagliari, led by the great Gigi Riva, did so in 1970. Napoli had triumphed twice previously in 1987 and 1990 thanks to Maradona's inspiration. Nothing more.

Victory this season was freedom from the stranglehold of the northern giants and the capital. One fan, explaining the never-ending festival, said: "We wanted to show the world our excitement, and that we have heart – something the north simply doesn't have."

Historic...Napoli fans celebrate the title with a flag of Diego Maradona

The rest of the world discovered the splendour of this Napoli team when they destroyed Ajax and Liverpool with high-scoring wins in the Champions League group stage. Football fans across Italy already knew about a special side in their midst, thanks to a 15-game unbeaten start to the season which was only ended in January.

Another element to the delight was the way this team had sprung almost from nowhere. Veteran coach Luciano Spalletti, 64, completely revamped the side in the summer of 2022 with astute, economical signings. Kvaratskhelia cost just £10m from Dinamo Batumi, while central defensive rock Kim Min-jae was a £16m buy from Fenerbahce – a real gamble with only one year of experience in European football.

> It was obvious from ten matches out that they would become Italian champions

Osimhen was already at the club, but his two previous seasons had been stymied by injuries. This time he added high achievement to his undoubted potential with a cascade of goals. Suddenly, the £70m transfer fee paid for him in the summer of 2021 did not seem so extravagant. A crucial role was also played by captain Giovanni Di Lorenzo, a rampaging right-back and binding emotional force in a club that always has to exist on a different emotional plane to others.

Where do Napoli go now after a dream season? Will stars like Osimhen and Kim be tempted by the riches of the Premier League? These are the eternal questions asked of champions, especially surprise title winners.

Napoli's narrow failure to overcome Milan in the quarter-finals of the Champions League will lead many to wonder whether they face struggle and strife ahead. I am more optimistic. They are not a team built around a superstar, they are a team in the best sense, a team with heart and soul.

Above all, there was a sure-footedness about Spalletti's work in managing both his players and the manic excitement around the club, which suggests this doesn't have to be a one-off miracle. They can walk tall outside the shadow of Maradona.

WorldSoccer

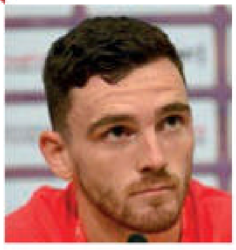
NEXT MONTH

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE...

2023 Women's World Cup

- PREVIEW, FIXTURES & SCHEDULE
- 50 STARS TO WATCH OUT FOR
- GROUP GUIDES WITH TEAM PROFILES

ON SALE JULY 7

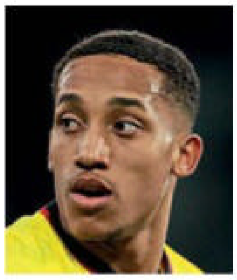


"Without him, nothing would've been possible. The way we wanted to play, the way we went about our business; everything started with Bobby ...when you look back on the great moments, Bobby was always involved"

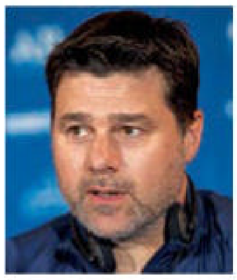
Liverpool's Andy Robertson pays tribute to the outgoing Roberto Firmino

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN



On the move ...Joao Pedro



Premier League return...Mauricio Pochettino

EUROPE

Brighton announced they will sign **JOAO PEDRO** from Watford this summer for a club-record fee, reported to be just under £30 million.

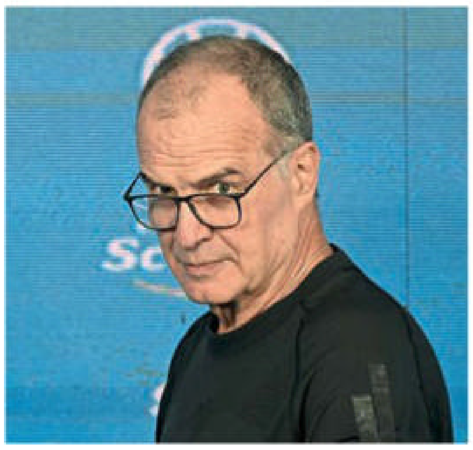
Bayer Leverkusen will sign Spanish left-back **ALEX GRIMALDO** from Benfica on a free transfer and Brazil right-back **ARTHUR** from America Mineiro, while Eintracht Frankfurt captured Egypt striker **OMAR MARMOUSH** on a free transfer from Wolfsburg.

Serie A side Udinese will sign Brazilian forward **BRENNER** from MLS club Cincinnati FC in a record-breaking fee for the American club.

Chelsea agreed a deal for **MAURICIO POCHETTINO** to take over as manager this summer, while **SAM ALLARDYCE** took charge of Leeds United for their final four games of the season after the sacking of Javi Gracia.

In the EFL, Watford appointed former Barnsley and West Brom boss **VALERIEN ISMAEL** as manager, while Swindon Town hired ex-Walsall manager **MICHAEL FLYNN** after sacking Jody Morris.

Bielsa returns to South America

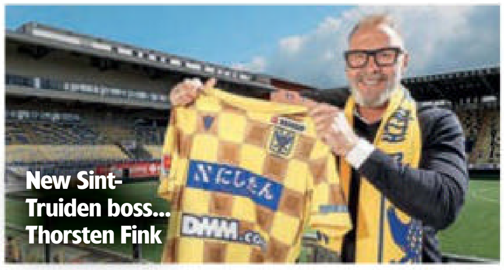


MARCELO BIELSA was appointed Uruguay head coach, replacing Diego Alonso who stepped down following the country's disappointing World Cup group-stage exit in Qatar.

It is the Argentine's first role since being sacked by Leeds United in February last year, and his first international role since leaving Chile in 2011. Prior to that, he managed his home country between 1998 and 2004.

The 67-year-old has signed a contract taking him through to the 2026 World Cup, and will take charge of his first matches in June friendlies against Nicaragua and Cuba. *More on page 86.*

Former Bayern Munich midfielder **THORSTEN FINK** took over at Belgian outfit Sint-Truiden, while ex-St. Pauli coach **TIMO SCHULTZ** agreed to take charge of Swiss giants Basel.



New Sint-Truiden boss... Thorsten Fink

In Spain, Getafe hired **PEPE BORDALAS** to replace Quique Sanchez Flores, while in Scotland **BARRY ROBSON** became Aberdeen's permanent manager after a successful spell in caretaker charge.

AFRICA

PIERRE-EMERICK AUBAMEYANG made himself available for the Gabon national team once again after making a U-turn on his international retirement.

Appointments, sackings and loans

OUT

Europa champion ...Glasner won last season's Europa League

EUROPE

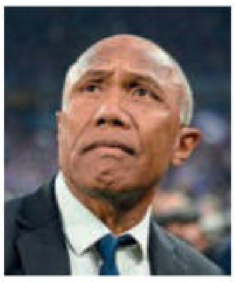
Liverpool confirmed that, as well as **JAMES MILNER** – who has been linked with Brighton – **ROBERTO FIRMINO**, **ALEX OXLADE-CHAMBERLAIN** and **NABY KEITA** will also all leave Anfield this summer. Meanwhile **LUCAS MOURA** and **PHIL JONES** will depart Tottenham and Manchester United respectively.

Eintracht Frankfurt announced that they will part company with Europa League-winning coach **OLIVER GLASNER** in the summer.

Norwich City's legendary striker **TEEMU PUKKI** will depart the Championship club this summer upon the expiry of his contract.

Barcelona's sporting director **JORDI CRUYFF** announced he will be stepping down from his role at the Camp Nou.

Nantes sacked coach **ANTOINE KOMBOUARE** just before the end of the season in a desperate bid to save themselves form relegation.



Dismissed... ex-Nantes coach Antoine Kombouare

MK Dons fired **MARK JACKSON** following their relegation from League One, and **DANNY SCHOFIELD** left Doncaster Rovers after a poor showing in League Two this campaign.

Former Watford, Sheffield United and Fulham boss **SLAVISA JOKANOVIC** left Dynamo Moscow.

Real Betis legend **JOAQUIN** confirmed that he will retire this summer at the age of 42. Elsewhere, ex-Ghana midfielder **KEVIN-PRINCE BOATENG** hung up his boots after Hertha Berlin's relegation from the Bundesliga and Cologne's long-serving left-back **JONAS HECTOR** announced his retirement, as did Freiburg striker **NILS PETERSEN**.

> “When I broke the news to my family they were all just over the moon, especially my mom. She said: ‘What took you so long?’”

Folarin Balogun announces his switch of international allegiance to the United States

ASIA

- Former Nepal boss **ABDULLAH AL MUTAIRI** became the coach of the Afghanistan national team.

CONCACAF

- USA successfully convinced former England Under-21 striker **FOLARIN BALOGUN**, who has enjoyed a prolific loan spell in France at Reims this season from Arsenal, to switch international allegiance.

- Grenada appointed former Wolverhampton Wanderers manager **TERRY CONNOR** as their new head coach just weeks ahead of the CONCACAF Gold Cup Prelims.

SOUTH AMERICA

- Former Brazil and Real Madrid boss **VANDERLEI LUXEMBURGO** returned to the dugout as manager of Corinthians for the third time.

OCEANIA

- Welshman **ROB SHERMAN**, a former assistant to Canada coach John Herdman, took charge of Fiji.

Retiring ...Joaquin

CONCACAF

- Major League Soccer sides New York Red Bulls and Chicago Fire both parted company with their managers, **GERHARD STRUBER** and **EZRA HENDRICKSON** respectively.

OBITUARIES

Mexico legend...Carbajal at the 1966 World Cup

Antonio CARBAJAL (1929-2023)

By playing at every tournament from 1950 to 1966, the Mexico goalkeeper made history as the first footballer to play at five World Cups – a record that has never been broken, and equalled by just five others. “*La Tota*” also holds the less wanted record of conceding the joint-most number of World Cup goals, 25. He spent the majority of his club career with Leon, for whom he played well over 300 games and later managed in three separate spells.

Nelsinho ROSA (1937-2023)

Brazilian football coach who worked at a number of clubs in his home country, including Fluminense, Vasco da Gama and Madureira, as well as a brief spell in charge of Saudi Arabia in 1992.

Arsenio IGLESIAS (1930-2023)

A Deportivo La Coruna legend, playing for his hometown club for six years after emerging from the academy before going on to manage the club on four separate occasions.

Between 1988 and 1995, he led the team from the brink of relegation to the third tier to the top flight and Copa del Rey success, the first in the club’s history. Iglesias also helped lay the foundations for Depor’s stunning La Liga title win in 2000 by signing or developing many of the players – Fran, Mauro Silva and Donato – that starred in that campaign.

Although he announced his retirement from football at the end of that season, Iglesias returned in January 1996 to take charge of Real Madrid midway through a disastrous season for the club. He guided them to sixth place before being replaced by Fabio Capello in the summer.

Inaki ALKIZA (1933-2023)

Former footballer for Real Sociedad who later served as club president from 1983 to 1992. An avowed Basque nationalist, Alkiza also worked in politics, serving as the mayor of San Sebastian in 1979. His son, Bittor, was also a professional footballer who won three caps for Spain and played for both Real Sociedad and Athletic Club.

Danish Hall of Fame... Rontved pictured at his induction in 2011

Per RONTVED (1949-2023)

When he retired from international duty, Rontved was the most-capped footballer in Danish football history, and the first man to reach the milestone of 75 caps. A decade earlier, he starred for his country at the Munich Olympics, scoring the winning goal against Brazil and being named Danish Footballer of the Year for 1972. His performances that summer earned him a move from Bronshoj in his home country to Bundesliga side Werder Bremen, where he established himself as one of Europe’s finest *Liberos*.

When Franz Beckenbauer left Bayern Munich in 1977, Rontved was expected to replace him, but the Dane opted to stay at Werder and later ended his career in his home country.

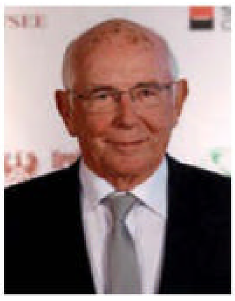
Ferran OLIVELLA (1936-2023)

The central defender was Spain’s captain as they won the 1964 Euros, with his performances at the finals earning him a spot in the team of the tournament.

Olivella also won a number of trophies in a 13-year career with Barcelona, including two La Ligas, four Copas del Rey and three Inter-Cities Fairs Cups.

Neil MATTHEWS (1966-2023)

The striker played in non-league as well as for the likes of Grimsby Town, Halifax Town, Stockport County and Lincoln City, before coaching in both Huddersfield Town and Bradford City’s academies.



Lifetime achievement award...Huberty was honoured by his colleagues in 2011

Ernst HUBERTY (1927-2023)

One of Germany’s best-known sports journalists and broadcasters. As well as commentating on some of football’s biggest moment – including the 1970 World Cup semi-final clash between West Germany and Italy, known in Germany as “the game of the century” – he also hosted the sports magazine television show *Sportschau*.

"He's a similar player because he has that innate talent in the final third which is difficult to find"

Barcelona coach Xavi on Lamine Yamal amid comparisons with Lionel Messi

On the RADAR

Spotlight on the players and coaches making waves

Benjamin SESKO

(Red Bull Salzburg)

As a tall, powerful striker scoring goals for Austria's most dominant club, the comparisons with Erling Haaland are irresistible. To date, Sesko is yet to rack up the serious numbers that marked out the Norwegian as a truly generational talent, although 20 league goals in two seasons is an impressive return for a 19-year-old.

Next season he will be testing himself in the German Bundesliga after a move to Salzburg's partner club RB Leipzig was confirmed last summer. The deal values the striker at €24 million, and means that the likes of Bayern Munich, Manchester United and Newcastle United – who had all been linked with the Slovenian – will have to wait for their chance to sign him.

This will be the third summer in a row that Salzburg have waved goodbye to their top scorer, following the departures of Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund) and Patson Daka (Leicester City).

QR CORNER

Dutch fourth-tier side UOW '02 score a dramatic late equaliser with a bicycle-kick from their goalkeeper.

Use a tablet or smartphone to scan the QR code

Pitso MOSIMANE

(Al Ahli Jeddah)

The CAF Champions League-winning coach, with both Mamelodi Sundowns and Al Ahly, will work in the Saudi Pro League next season after sealing promotion with Al Ahli Jeddah.

Raphael LEA'I

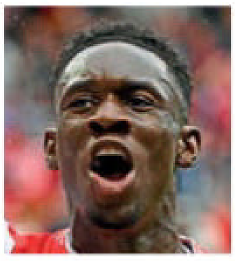
(Velez Mostar)

By scoring for Bosnian side Velez, striker Lea'i became the first-ever Solomon Islander to score in a professional European league.

Taty CASTELLANOS

(Girona)

The Argentine forward spent the 2022-23 season on loan at Girona from New York City FC, and in April made history by scoring four times against Real Madrid – the first player to do so in La Liga since 1947.



Folarin BALOGUN

(Reims)

The Arsenal loanee hit six goals to fire England's Under-21s to the Euros, but the New York-born striker will now play at the 2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup instead after switching international allegiance to the United States.

Lamine YAMAL

(Barcelona)

In April, the 15-year-old became Barcelona's youngest-ever player, and only the fifth player to feature in La Liga before turning 16.

Arne SLOT

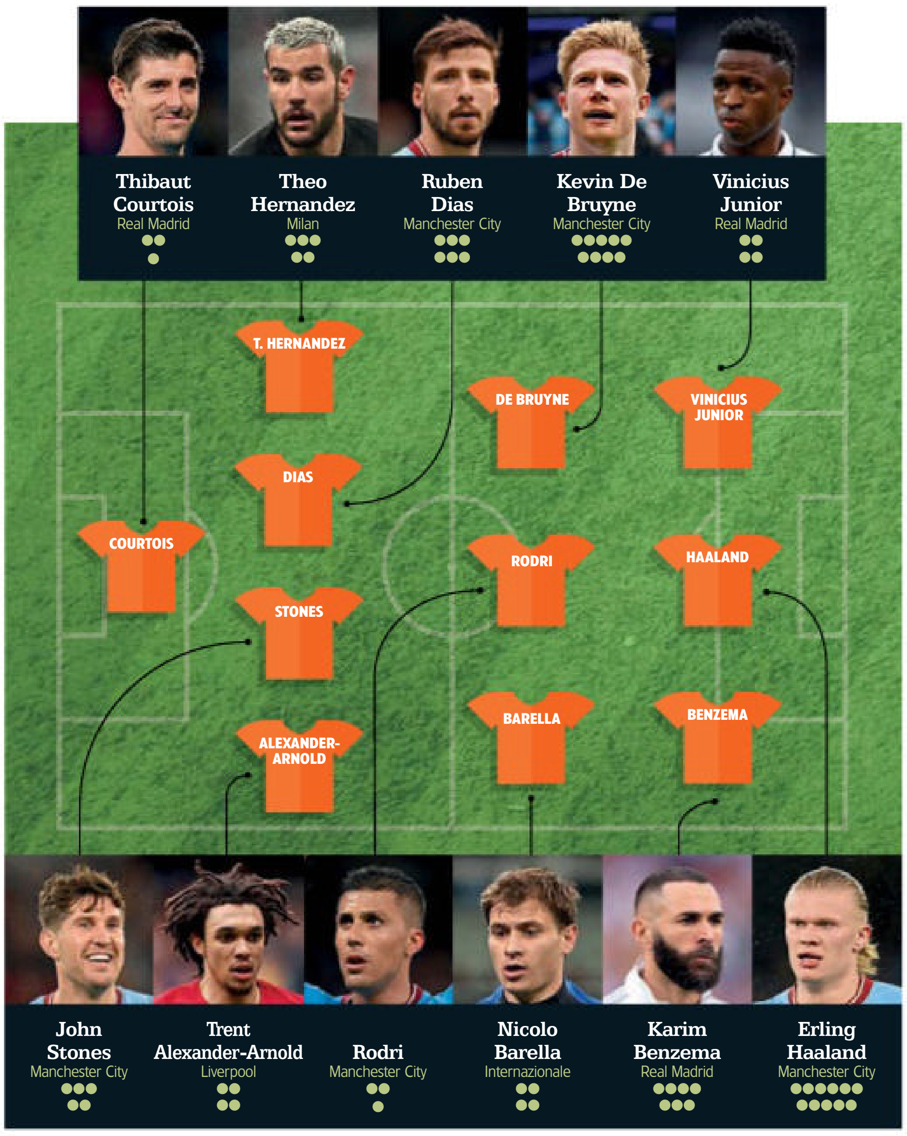
(Feyenoord)

The 44-year-old coach is receiving admiring glances from across Europe – notably including Tottenham Hotspur – after guiding Feyenoord to their first Eredivisie title victory since 2016-17.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

APRIL 2023



SEASON RANKINGS

Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	16
Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	16
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	7
Mike Maignan (Milan)	6
Alex Meret (Napoli)	6
Wojciech Szczesny (Juventus)	6
David de Gea (Manchester United)	5
Ederson (Manchester City)	4
Yann Sommer (Bayern Munich)	4
Alisson (Liverpool)	3
Gianluigi Donnarumma (PSG)	3
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Chelsea)	2
Diogo Costa (Porto)	2
Andre Onana (Internazionale)	2
Nick Pope (Newcastle United)	2
Aaron Ramsdale (Arsenal)	2
Rafal Gikiewicz (Augsburg)	1
Bernd Leno (Fulham)	1
Simon Mignolet (Club Brugge)	1
Juan Musso (Atalanta)	1
Rui Patricio (Roma)	1
Frederik Ronnow (Union Berlin)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Ajax)	1
Brice Samba (Lens)	1
Kevin Trapp (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Robin Zentner (Mainz)	1

DEFENDERS

Kim Min-jae (Napoli)	28
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	20
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	19
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	17
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	14
Joao Cancelo (Bayern Munich)	12
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	10
Gabriel (Arsenal)	10
Josko Gvardiol (RB Leipzig)	9
Nathan Ake (Manchester City)	8
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	8
Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund)	8
Jordi Alba (Barcelona)	7
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	7
John Stones (Manchester City)	7
Kieran Trippier (Newcastle United)	7
Oleksandr Zinchenko (Arsenal)	7
Danilho Doekhi (Union Berlin)	6
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	6
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	6
William Saliba (Arsenal)	6
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	5
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	5
Danilo (Juventus)	5
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	5
Matthijs de Ligt (Bayern Munich)	4
Alex Grimaldo (Benfica)	4
Mario Rui (Napoli)	4
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	4
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	4
Andreas Christensen (Barcelona)	3
Diogo Dalot (Manchester United)	3
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	3
Eric Dier (Tottenham)	3
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	3
Lisandro Martinez (Manchester United)	3
Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica)	3
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	3
Pau Torres (Villarreal)	3
Marcos Acuna (Sevilla)	2
Manuel Akanji (Manchester City)	2
Alejandro Balde (Barcelona)	2
Sven Botman (Newcastle United)	2
Sergino Dest (Milan)	2
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	2
Roger Ibanez (Roma)	2
Marquinhos (PSG)	2
Chancel Mbemba (Marseille)	2
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	2
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	2
Amir Rrahmani (Napoli)	2
Romain Saiss (Besiktas)	2
Fabian Schar (Newcastle United)	2
Leonardo Spinazzola (Roma)	2
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	2
Nuno Tavares (Marseille)	2
Rafael Toloi (Atalanta)	2
Ben White (Arsenal)	2
Francesco Acerbi (Internazionale)	1
Toby Alderweireld (Antwerp)	1
Loic Bade (Sevilla)	1
Alexander Bah (Benfica)	1
Rodrigo Becao (Udinese)	1
Ramy Bensebaini (Borussia M'Gladbach)	1
Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus)	1
Bremer (Juventus)	1
Dan Burn (Newcastle United)	1
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	1
Dante (Nice)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Bilbao)	1
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	1
Nico Elvedi (Borussia M'Gladbach)	1
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	1
Caio Henrique (Monaco)	1
Lucas Hernandez (Bayern Munich)	1
Paul Jaeckel (Union Berlin)	1
Reece James (Chelsea)	1
Pierre Kalulu (Milan)	1
Simon Kjaer (Milan)	1
Kalidou Koulibaly (Chelsea)	1
Diogo Leite (Union Berlin)	1
Tyrell Malacia (Manchester United)	1
Noussair Mazraoui (Bayern Munich)	1
Ben Mee (Brentford)	1
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	1
Cesar Montes (Espanyol)	1
Gonzalo Montiel (Sevilla)	1
Daniel Munoz (Genk)	1
Jesus Navas (Sevilla)	1
Strahinja Pavlovic (Red Bull Salzburg)	1
Alfonso Pedraza (Villarreal)	1
Diego Rico (Real Sociedad)	1
Alessio Romagnoli (Lazio)	1
Cristian Romero (Tottenham)	1
Emerson Royal (Tottenham)	1
Alex Sandro (Juventus)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Luke Shaw (Manchester United)	1
Antonio Silva (Benfica)	1
Niklas Sule (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Malick Thiaw (Milan)	1
Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal)	1
Raphael Varane (Manchester United)	1
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	1
Aaron Wan-Bissaka (Manchester United)	1
Wendell (Porto)	1

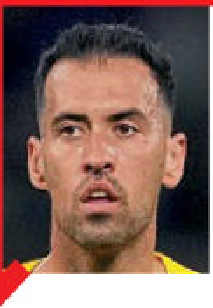
MIDFIELDERS

Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	33
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	26
Pedri (Barcelona)	16
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	15
Casemiro (Manchester United)	14
Jude Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund)	11
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	11
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	10
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	9
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	9
Rodri (Manchester City)	7
Aurelien Tchouameni (Real Madrid)	7
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	6
Sofyan Amrabat (Fiorentina)	5
Gavi (Barcelona)	5
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	4
Julian Brandt (Borussia Dortmund)	4
Adrien Rabiot (Juventus)	4
Granit Xhaka (Arsenal)	4
Sergio Busquets (Barcelona)	3
Eduardo Camavinga (Real Madrid)	3
Przemyslaw Frankowski (Lens)	3
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	3
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	3
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	3
Piotr Zielinski (Napoli)	3
Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle United)	2
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Tottenham)	2
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	2
Alexis Mac Allister (Brighton)	2
Joao Mario (Benfica)	2
Scott McTominay (Manchester United)	2
Thomas Partey (Arsenal)	2
Marco Verratti (PSG)	2
Martin Zubimendi (Real Sociedad)	2
Leandro Barreiro (Mainz)	1
Benjamin Bourigeaud (Rennes)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	1
Angel Di Maria (Juventus)	1
Brahim Diaz (Milan)	1
Christian Eriksen (Manchester United)	1
Jorginho (Arsenal)	1
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	1
Mohammed Kudus (Ajax)	1
Sergej Milinkovic-Savic (Lazio)	1
Azzedine Ounahi (Marseille)	1
Roberto Pereyra (Udinese)	1
Ivan Rakitic (Sevilla)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (RB Leipzig)	1
Thiago (Liverpool)	1
Vitinha (PSG)	1
Joe Willock (Newcastle United)	1
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	1

FORWARDS

Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	61
Kylian Mbappe (PSG)	31
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	26
Lionel Messi (PSG)	24
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (Napoli)	23
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	23
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	18
Marcus Rashford (Manchester United)	17
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	13
Neymar (PSG)	8
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	7
Aleksandar Mitrovic (Fulham)	6
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	6
Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)	5
Cody Gakpo (Liverpool)	4
Rafael Leao (Milan)	4
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	4
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Gabriel Martinelli (Arsenal)	3
Lois Openda (Lens)	3
Enner Valencia (Fenerbahce)	3
Sheraldo Becker (Union Berlin)	2
Kingsley Coman (Bayern Munich)	2
Ousmane Dembele (Barcelona)	2
Serge Gnabry (Bayern Munich)	2
Jack Grealish (Manchester City)	2
Gabriel Jesus (Arsenal)	2
Randal Kolo Muani (Eintracht Frankfurt)	2
Romelu Lukaku (Internazionale)	2
Donyell Malen (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Sadio Mane (Bayern Munich)	2
Eddie Nketiah (Arsenal)	2
Raphinha (Barcelona)	2
Marco Reus (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Cristiano Ronaldo (Al Nassr)	2
Rafa Silva (Benfica)	2
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	2
Callum Wilson (Newcastle United)	2
Marco Asensio (Real Madrid)	1
Sofiane Boufal (Al Rayyan)	1
Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting (Bayern Munich)	1
Julio Enciso (Brighton)	1
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	1
Olivier Giroud (Milan)	1
Sebastien Haller (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Lucas Holer (Freiburg)	1
Vincent Janssen (Antwerp)	1
Jesper Lindstrom (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton)	1
Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid)	1
Christopher Nkunku (RB Leipzig)	1
Dani Olmo (RB Leipzig)	1
Paul Onuachu (Southampton)	1
Dango Ouattara (Bournemouth)	1
Ivan Perisic (Tottenham)	1
Richarlison (Tottenham)	1
Rodrygo (Real Madrid)	1
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	1
Alexis Sanchez (Marseille)	1
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	1
Martin Terrier (Rennes)	1
Ivan Toney (Brentford)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Leandro Trossard (Arsenal)	1
Cengiz Under (Marseille)	1
Hakim Ziyech (Chelsea)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)



Barcelona

The departure of legendary captain Sergio Busquets spells the end of an era for the Spanish champions

Passing metronome ...Busquets is leaving Barca after 18 years

Sergio Busquets has drawn the curtains on his trophy-laden Barcelona career. The timing is oddly fitting for a player who remains pivotal not just in the starting line-up but the club's playing philosophy. Had he stayed for one more season, he may have eclipsed Lionel Messi's all-time appearance record for the club yet, just as with his role on the pitch, Busquets never was one for grabbing headlines.

Playing over 700 Barcelona games is even more impressive considering he did not join the club's academy until he was 15, and was still playing in Spain's fourth tier for the B team four years later. What unlocked everything was his coach for Barca's second team: Pep Guardiola. The era-defining football strategist's elevation to the Camp Nou hot seat saw a tall, wiry midfielder with slumped shoulders promoted to the starting line-up.

Busquets lacked pace, physical strength and a goal threat (scoring fewer than 20 club goals across 15 seasons), and he would never dive into tackles. He did not need any of that; instead he was defined by his positioning, precise passing, calmness, composure and consistency.

Iconic midfield...Xavi, Iniesta and Busquets

His Barcelona exit is on his terms, with boss Xavi – who played with him in the heart of the club's memorable midfield trio, alongside Andres Iniesta – unsuccessfully attempting to keep him.

The 34-year-old remained an irreplaceable component of the midfield and was never likely to leave the Camp Nou for any other European club. Instead, Inter Miami and an offer from Saudi Arabia are attempting to land the midfielder – both offering a slower, less intense league that would benefit him immeasurably. It is no coincidence that his former team-mate Lionel Messi has similar offers on the table – an indicator of football's shifting sands and economic muscle.

Busquets came from a footballing family: his dad Carles spent the 1990s at Barcelona and was ahead of his time in playing style. Once described by *L'Equipe* as “the goalkeeper with no hands”, he emphasised passing out from the back in a sweeper-keeper role. Sergio also had a clearly defined playing style, but he was influenced by his dad's former team-mate Guardiola.

Alongside Iniesta and Xavi, Busquets formed a Barca midfield of – to varying degrees – Guardiola clones. All had physical limitations, and all centred their games around passing, in finding and creating space. Yet of them all, Busquets was the closest Guardiola replica. “I would like to reincarnate myself in [Busquets],” the coach said after winning the 2011 Champions League. “He is the best player in the world.”

> “I would like to reincarnate myself in [Busquets]. He is the best player in the world”
>
> Pep Guardiola on the midfielder in 2011

And he meant it. For a manager that values control of the football above all else, having a player so alike himself at the heart of the midfield was vital to Pep's early success. Busquets' metronomic passing at the base of the midfield made him as vital a part of that iconic team as anyone – not that he was recognised for that with individual accolades. After Barcelona's second European crown in three years, seven of their players were nominated for the 2011 Ballon d'Or, but he was not among them.

A lack of recognition is something that Busquets came to expect. Speaking about his role, he said: “The work you do in this position is rarely noticed, even though it needs anticipation and intelligence.

“I spend the whole match calculating. I think about how many guys are playing on the right, how many down the middle, who supports from midfield if the striker pulls wide. The key to this role is logic. You need to judge things well.”

His managers and team-mates, at least, never failed to recognise his contributions. “If I were a player, I'd be like Busquets,” said Vicente del Bosque, the boss of Spain's 2010 World Cup and Euro 2012-winning sides, echoing the sentiments of Guardiola, while Messi once said: “When there will be trouble, Busquets will always be there.”

Busquets won everything with club and country. Yet as football has evolved, so has the role of midfielders. The elite level has sped up just as he has slowed down. For all of his technical brilliance and positional intelligence, he has increasingly struggled with physical and direct opponents.

In possession, there arguably remains no better player in world football than Busquets. But when his team loses the ball, his lack of mobility has increasingly made him a net negative when transitioning to defence for both club and country. Busquets and Barca have struggled disproportionately on the European stage compared to La Liga.

Busquets is Barcelona's captain and his exit will leave a big leadership void, just six months on from Gerard Pique's retirement. Sergi Roberto and Jordi Alba, second and third on the club's captaincy group, are no longer regulars and the club are reportedly trying to offload the latter. Fourth captain Marc-Andre ter Stegen is a leader, but the club wants an outfielder as captain, with doubts over Robert Lewandowski's suitability for the role.

That will inevitably increase suggestions of Messi returning, but the club must facilitate more first-team exits before that even becomes a possibility. They must shave €200m off their wage bill, and while the Pique and Busquets exits make a dent in that figure there is a long way to go before they are in a position to register any new contracts – which might now include signing Busquets' successor.

Young midfield talents Pedri and Gavi excel higher up the pitch, while Frenkie de Jong, who arrived in 2019 as Busquets' intended heir, has so far failed to convince in that deep midfield position. Can the Dutchman step up once the shadow of a club great is removed, or does money need to be spent on a replacement?

It is a question that will define Barcelona's summer, and determine whether they can be successful again next season. For the past decade, the club has based its playing identity around Busquets. His exit may be typically low-key but presents the *Blaugrana* and their new sporting director – rumoured to be Deco with Jordi Cruyff also exiting the Camp Nou this summer – with their biggest conundrum since Messi's departure.

Colin Millar

Role model... Busquets and Pep Guardiola

Budafoki

A team of former prodigies inspire second-tier club to stunning cup run

Across Europe's top 30 leagues this season – according to the UEFA coefficient rankings – only two second-tier sides reached the cup final of their respective countries. One of them was Scotland's Inverness Caledonian Thistle, a club that has spent much of the last 20 years in the top flight. The other was Budafoki MTE, a team that is little known even in Hungary, never mind the rest of the continent. Yet despite all the odds, the club somehow wrote history this season after making it to the Hungarian Cup final for the first time.

Budafoki's history is sparse. Since its inception in 1912, the club has only competed in the top flight of Hungary twice. Yet it also played a significant role in the foundations of Hungarian football.

After the Second World War, it was here that legendary manager Gusztav Sebes made a name for himself. Under him, Budafoki made it to Hungary's top flight for the first time in 1945. On the back of that success, Sebes became manager of the Hungarian national team and built the *"Aranycsapat"* (Golden Team) that reached the 1954 World Cup final.

Former prodigy...Krisztian Adorjan spent five years at Liverpool, from 2009 to 2014

At Budafoki, Sebes also discovered midfielder Jozsef Zakarias, a member of the *Aranycsapat* who played a key role in the team's success to win Olympic gold and record that famous 6-3 victory over England at Wembley.

Zakarias was born and bred in Budafok and a statue of him can be found outside the club's stadium. His legacy lives on with a foundation in his honour the current majority shareholder of the club.

Budafoki is rightly proud of its roots, which inexorably link the club to Hungary's greatest era. But as its history goes, that's about it. As communism was established in Hungary from the 1950s, Budafoki fell into relative obscurity. Since then, the club has mainly competed in the second division.

During the post-communist era, it almost went extinct when a wine company, named Henkell, bought the club and wanted to expand its factory to the club's stadium. In the final hours, the club was saved. But by the early 2010s, Budafoki was on the road to nowhere, competing in the lower tiers of Hungary's semi-professional and amateur leagues.

Then, an Australian owner, Robert Belteky, bought a 99 per cent holding in the company, and helped revive Budafoki, taking them from the third tier to the top flight for only the second time in the club's history.

However, after just one season, Budafoki plummeted back to the second tier, and Belteky has since been forced to sell his shares.

In the last few seasons the club has become a solid mid-table team in the second tier, operating on a meagre budget. The current team is made up of players who were previously predicted for much bigger things.

> The team is made up of players who were previously predicted for much bigger things...like Krisztian Adorjan, who a decade ago was the top scorer of Liverpool's reserve team

Players like Krisztian Adorjan, who a decade ago was the top scorer of Liverpool's reserve team; Attila Filkor, who had stints at Internazionale and Milan; and Oliver Horvath who made it to PSV and Ajax's academy. In addition, midfielders Mario Nemeth and Andras Csonka both competed for Hungary at youth tournaments like the Under-20 World Cup and the Under-17 European Championship, while as a teenager Peter Beke looked set for a bright future at Hamburg after scoring 32 goals in 41 games for Hamburg's Under-19s.

Finalists...Budafoki line up ahead of the Hungarian Cup final

While Budafoki's league form underwhelmed this season, the cup allowed these players to showcase why they were once so highly rated.

On the way to the final, Budafoki beat two top-flight teams in Kisvarda and Vasas, overcame a potential upset by eliminating Ivancsa, who had knocked out champions Ferencvaros,

and recorded a victory over Bolcske from the fourth division, while beating second-tier Szeged in extra-time.

Zalaegerszeg in the final was an unlikely opponent. Despite being a first-division club, they had never won the Hungarian Cup either, giving Budafoki hope of another upset.

In front of over 24,000 fans at the Puskas Arena, the plucky underdogs almost pulled it off. Budafoki took the final to extra-time and were minutes away from a penalty shootout when Zalaegerszeg scored in the 117th and 120th minute to deliver a cruel blow.

The club's players slumped to the ground after the final whistle. Having come so close, it was a bittersweet moment. Yet second-division teams rarely make it to cup finals and, considering the average age of the squad is only 25.4, this could be the beginning of an exciting new chapter in Budafoki's history.

Ben Bocsak

Burnley

Vincent Kompany achieves impressive title win in his first season with Burnley

It's not just the impressive immediate promotion from the Championship – just 320 days after relegation from the Premier League – that caught the eye for Vincent Kompany's Burnley side. It's the way the Clarets did it: in style, and against a backdrop of difficult circumstances.

With a tally of 101 points, the club threatened – but ultimately fell just short of – Reading's 2005-06 English Football League record haul of 106 points, but are fully deserving of their Championship title. Neil Warnock, the irrepressible manager of Huddersfield Town and a league champion himself in 2011, has described them as one of the best second-tier sides of the modern era.

Kompany won 12 trophies as a player, but says that managerial success is his most pleasing achievement: "If I line up the things we had to do to get to where we are today then, yes, it is a little bit more satisfying than what I had to do to be successful as a player," he said upon promotion. The former Manchester City captain inherited a club that had been relegated, were deep in debt and needed to sell their best players – and quickly.

The 37-year-old Belgian explained that he had arrived at Turf Moor with "not exactly a blank page, but definitely a lot of missing pieces to the puzzle".

Supporters may have feared for the future. American management firm ALK Capital acquired control of Burnley in December 2020 via a leveraged takeover, taking the club from debt-free to having debts of around £100 million. The Clarets had to repay a significant proportion of a £65m loan, taken out during the takeover, upon relegation.

Dwight McNeil, Nathan Collins, Nick Pope and Maxwel Cornet all went out the door and raised a reported £70m. But no matter: Kompany's side subsequently secured a place in the lucrative Premier League again with seven games to spare following an effective rebuild – with 17 new senior players – after a 2-1 win at Middlesbrough, and having played stylish football across the campaign.

Indeed, the Clarets are stylistically much changed from the obstinate, low-block play used by previous manager Sean Dyche.

Kompany does not hide inspiration from his former manager Pep Guardiola: his team play a possession-based game (no Championship side had more of the ball), press high up the pitch and prefer short passes. A 4-2-3-1 formation has been used in the main, tweaked to a 4-3-3, with Premier League loanees Ian Maatsen from Chelsea, Taylor Harwood-Bellis from Manchester City and Nathan Tella from Southampton – top scorer with 17 goals – playing major roles.

Shrewd recruitment from the Belgian league augmented the side too. Wingers Benson Manuel and Anass Zaroury arrived from the Jupiler Pro League, while assistant manager Craig Bellamy and defensive midfielder Josh Cullen followed Kompany from Anderlecht to the north west. The work of Richard Bredice, a performance analyst who Kompany brought from Manchester City to Anderlecht in 2019, has reportedly been a key element behind the scenes too, with detailed classroom sessions accompanying on-field drilling.

And all of this was why Kompany was linked with the top jobs as Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur before freshly inking a new five-year contract to tie him to a longer stay in Lancashire. Next up: to test his exciting brand of football in the Premier League.

Gregor MacGregor

CHAMPIONS
sky bet CHAMPIONSHIP EFL
sky bet CHAMPIONSHIP EFL
sky bet CHAMPIONSHIP EFL
sky bet CHAMPIONSHIP EFL

Champions ...Kompany celebrates the title and promotion with his players

Rakow Czestochowa

Polish underdogs complete remarkable rise by winning the league title

Modest home... Rakow's Miejski Stadion Pilkarski

Czestochowa, a city of over 200,000 people, is mostly known as the home of the famous Black Madonna painting. It is this reputation that gives the local football team its nickname, "Religious Medallions." The club was founded in the 1920s, with its roots in the city's industrial district where a big steelworks was located.

For most of the 20th century, the team had a modest record, moving between the fourth, third and second tiers, with a shock run to the Polish Cup final in 1967 providing the standout moment. In 1994, Rakow reached the Ekstraklasa – Poland's top flight. They stayed up for four seasons, but relegation was quickly followed by further back-to-back relegations that meant that, by 2001, the club was back down in the fourth tier.

Watching in the crowd as Rakow were sent down from the top division was a young supporter named Michal Swierczewski who, seeing fans crying around him, promised himself that one day the club would return.

Thirteen years later, after making his money in computing, the young businessman became Rakow owner.

Within the first two years, five different managers had come and gone, with a couple lasting only a matter of weeks. But after narrowly missing out on the play-offs for promotion to the second tier, Swierczewski finally found his man. In April 2016, he appointed Marek Papszun, a former primary school teacher who had coached in the lower leagues. It was a move that brought an end to the short-termism of Swierczewski's early appointments, and Papszun has been in place ever since.

Czech defender Tomas Petrasek arrived at the same time, and his first impressions were not good: "The owner's plan was ambitious. But when I arrived and saw what this club, playing at the third level, looked like, I thought it would be hard."

But Papszun quickly set about convincing his doubters and within three years he had won two league titles and achieved Swierczewski's dream of promotion back to the Ekstraklasa.

> "When I arrived and saw what this club, playing at the third level, looked like, I thought it would be hard"
>
> **Rakow defender Tomas Petrasek**

Finishing tenth in their first season back in the top flight was an impressive return for a team considered underdogs, but it was nothing compared with what was to follow. In both of the next two seasons, Rakow finished second in the league and won the domestic cup. Now, they have gone one step further and lifted the league title. Only a penalty-shootout defeat to Legia Warsaw in the final denied them a third consecutive Polish Cup and league-cup double.

Success has been achieved with a hugely international squad, with foreigners accounting for almost three quarters of the minutes played by Rakow players this season. Of their 11 most-used players, only two are Poles, with the others' nationalities including Croatian, Spanish, Bosnian, Serbian, Greek, Ukrainian and Latvian.

It is to Papszun's credit that he has successfully merged such a cosmopolitan squad. According to two of his senior players, the manager is behind much of the team's success.

"Papszun is the most important person in my career," says Petrasek, who has remained a significant figure.

Stepping down ...Rakow coach Marek Papszun

"Thanks to him I developed incredibly, from a third-level player to be capped for my country".

Croatian defender Zoran Arsenic, one of the team leaders, agrees: "The most important thing is good organisation. Everything is arranged, down to the smallest thing. We have a good coach".

Repeating the miracle next season will be extremely tough then, given that Papszun has announced he will step down from the role this summer.

"There is no one clear reason," he said when asked to explain his departure, but he may well feel that he has overachieved with the club and can take them no further.

Rakow's stadium only has a capacity of 5,500, boosted by temporary stands. Improvements have been promised, both by the club's hierarchy and the country's prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, who made assurances of financial assistance from the government worth around €10 million. Modernisation and expansion – to at least 8,000 – is required in order meet UEFA requirements.

"I believe that these declarations will be implemented," said Boguslaw Cygan, a member of the club's board, "and within a dozen or so months we will be able to play at the new stadium".

Until those developments are completed, Rakow will play their Champions League qualifiers in Sosnowiec, some 43 miles away. In each of the last two seasons, they have failed to qualify for the Europa Conference League group stage at the play-off round. But their new manager – Papszun's assistant, Dawid Szwarga – is bracing himself for progress on three fronts.

"We will have to combine the European challenge with Ekstraklasa and Polish Cup games," he says.

Indeed, while Papszun might feel that the club has gone as far as it can, the club is not ready to relent in its ambition. "We are not a profit-oriented club to sell footballers and earn on it," says Cygan. "We would like to do something for this local community, for the city".

Dariusz Kurowski

UEC

A new organisation to represent the clubs outside of Europe's elite

At the Renaissance Hotel in Brussels, the would-be members of the new Union of European Clubs finally surfaced.

There were 40 clubs from 25 countries in attendance, plus more than 30 online, which exceeded expectations. No attendance list was circulated – the UEC did not want that to look like a membership roster, which would give the wrong impression – but the names on the badges were there to be seen.

The clubs came from across Europe. AIK Stockholm, Keflavik from Iceland, Maltese club Hamrun Spartans and Spanish sides including Sevilla and Osasuna, plus five English clubs.

Two-and-a-half years after Katarina Pijetlovic, a Bosnian academic specialising in sports law, former Everton and Republic of Ireland player Gareth Farrelly, also a lawyer, and the owner of Croatian club Lokomotiva Zagreb, Dennis Gudasic, began talking about a new association for smaller European clubs, the UEC was a reality.

Membership will be open to professional and semi-professional clubs from the top two divisions in all European countries. A general assembly will be held at the end of 2023, when the success – or not – of the UEC can be measured. No one in Brussels wanted to put a figure on any potential target, but 103 clubs from 33 countries have been in touch.

Under questioning from journalists, Gudasic later said: "If the current representative [of clubs in Europe] has 130 members, anything above that figure would be a bonus."

The UEC is not looking to confront the existing European Club Association, but to be complementary and represent the 1,000 or more clubs who do not play regularly in UEFA competition and are not members of the ECA.

After the formation of the UEC was presented at the Play the Game conference in Odense in June 2022, the ECA responded by launching a new network claiming to recruit 500 extra clubs, but none of these would get any voting rights.

In contrast, the UEC will be one member, one vote, with a 13-person executive committee to be formed drawn from clubs of all sizes. That will be a challenge as there is a huge gulf in the size of putative members, from Premier League clubs such as Crystal Palace, whose co-owner Steve Parrish was a speaker in Brussels, to the likes of League of Wales side Aberystwyth Town.

The UEC has an office in Brussels after receiving €23,000 in seed capital from the owner of Irish club Shelbourne to help with basics such as office space and logos, and has the clear support of La Liga in Spain, who helped organise the event, and the European Union.

Margaritis Schinas, vice-president of the EU Commission, was also in Brussels, where he said: "European competition should not be the preserve of a small elite of clubs, who just keep playing and playing at the expense of the rest of the clubs in Europe."

The challenge for the UEC is that, currently, the ECA is recognised by UEFA as the sole representative of clubs in Europe through a Memorandum of Understanding between the two bodies. Asked about that Pijetlovic, who would be a force to be reckoned with if elected leader, simply said: "MOUs expire."

Though not seeking conflict, the UEC will have battles ahead but the mood in Brussels amongst the clubs in attendance was one that signalled changes can – and will – be achieved.

Steve Menary

UEC founders... Gareth Farrelly and Katarina Pijetlovic

UNION OF EUROPEAN CLUBS
LAUNCH EVENT
Brussels, 24th April 2023
ALL CLUBS OF ALL SIZES DESERVE A VO
UNION EUR CLU
FOOTBALL

eye witness

Paul Rutledge reports

NORTHERN IRELAND

The rise and rise of Larne FC

He may not be a Hollywood A-lister, but Kenny Bruce is a star in the eyes of followers of Larne Football Club. In the same way that actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney are transforming the fortunes of Wrexham in Wales, Bruce has put Larne FC firmly on the footballing map in Northern Ireland and beyond.

Over the past five-and-a-half years, Bruce has pumped around £5 million into turning the club in the port town of Larne in County Antrim into a force to be reckoned with in the Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL) Premiership, the top tier of Northern Irish football.

For the first time in their

Danske
PREM
CHAM
Danske Bank
Danske Bank

**Champions…
Larne lift the NIFL
Premiership trophy**
Credit: Bill Guiller/Larne FC

ke Bank
MIERSHIP
STAND
2023 CHAM
LANDMARK
ke Bank
MIERSHIP
PIONS
Danske Bank
Danske B

134-year history, Larne have become kings of Northern Irish football, wrestling the crown away from perennial champions Linfield who had won the league in the previous four seasons. During their 38 league matches in 2022-23, they won 25, drew eight and lost just five, giving them a six-point cushion over their nearest challengers.

So comfortable was their lead, they could afford to lose their final game of the season 3-0 to Coleraine. That was one of their heaviest defeats during a term in which they scored 64 goals and conceded only 22. A 15-game unbeaten run – including 11 wins and four draws – between January and April gave them an unassailable lead. A 2-0 victory over Crusaders in mid-April saw the side managed by Tiernan Lynch crowned champions for the first time.

But it's not all about the senior men's team for businessman Bruce. From the start, when he announced he wanted to invest in his hometown club, the aim was to improve things on and off the pitch. His money has seen a new state-of-the-art artificial surface laid at Inver Park, the club's home ground, and another at a facility previously known as The Cliff, which now houses the Larne FC Academy.

Grandstand and changing room renovations, the creation of two new stands and the installation of new floodlighting, all at Inver Park, are among the other projects already completed alongside the establishment of a club academy. A new main stand at the club's home is also in the pipeline, which will include extensive office space and executive lounges and boxes.

The investment and progressive thinking at the club have been driven by chairman Gareth Clements and an enthusiastic board alongside Bruce.

Community engagement is a key part of Larne's vision for the future. The club has just completed a five-year strategy, Aspire2Inspire, which has seen it reach out far beyond the stands of Inver Park. And its new vision for the years ahead – For The Town – talks about the team, club staff and facilities serving the people of Larne every day as a community hub, bringing everyone together across the religious divide that still exists in Northern Ireland.

The club has dozens of boys and girls teams, while the senior women's team are competing in the NIFL Women's Premiership this season after gaining promotion last term.

Lynch, who had previously been part of the coaching staff at Belfast-based NIFL Premiership side Glentoran when they won Irish Cups in 2013 and 2015, was appointed manager of the senior men's team in the summer of September 2017 and Bruce's involvement came soon after. As player, he represented Cliftonville,

Larne's coaching team ...(from left to right) Gary Haveron, head of recruitment Gerry Flynn, Tiernan Lynch and Seamus Lynch
Credit: Bill Guiller/Larne FC

History...Larne players celebrate the club's first top-tier title
Credit: Bill Guiller/Larne FC

Larne captain... Tomas Cosgrove in full flight at Inver Park
Credit: Bill Guiller/Larne FC

> They produced some superb performances on the way to claiming their first league title and becoming the first club from outside Belfast to collect Northern Ireland domestic football's top prize since Portadown in 2002

a club based close to his north Belfast roots, at both Under-18 and reserve team level before going to university in America. During his time at Long Island University he first began to do his coaching badges.

On his return from the US he helped his brother Seamus when he was coaching Cliftonville Under-18s. Seamus is now assistant manager at Larne, while Gary Haveron is first-team coach. The two brothers subsequently followed the then-Cliftonville manager Eddie Patterson when he moved across the city to Glentoran.

Alongside that, Tiernan and Seamus helped to establish a new football academy at Belfast Metropolitan College – a blend of education and football skills development that they had sampled in the US.

When Tiernan subsequently took charge of Larne they were near the bottom of the NIFL Championship, the second tier of senior football in Northern Ireland.

A few weeks before Bruce's takeover the local council temporarily closed Inver Park because the ground was deemed unsafe. The average gate for home matches back then was around 100 – now it is well over 2,000.

They managed to finish seventh in the Championship at the end of the 2017-18 season, before Lynch made some shrewd signings including the return of Jeff Hughes to his hometown club.

Hughes – who had previously played for Larne from 2003 to 2005 before moving to England to play for the likes of Bristol Rovers, Notts County and Tranmere Rovers – was a key figure in the 2018-19 season as the NIFL Championship league trophy was secured with a record points haul.

Also on board that term was striker David McDaid, a player with tons of top-flight experience, and defender Tomas Cosgrove and winger Martin Donnelly, who were both Premiership winners in the past. All bought into Lynch's vision and were happy to drop into the second tier. Also recruited was Nigerian-born midfielder Fuad Sule, a player who will leave Larne this summer but not before securing cult hero status.

Promotion meant that Larne were back in the Irish Premiership for the first time since 2005. Ahead of the 2019-20 season, it was announced that the team would enter the top tier as a full-time outfit.

COVID-19 meant that the league season was cut short, with Larne finishing sixth in the 12-team Premiership, but just three points behind third-placed Crusaders when the curtain came down prematurely.

Undeterred by that disappointment though, they strode into the next campaign full of confidence and soon ended a 33-year wait for a senior trophy as Jeff Hughes lifted the County Antrim Shield following a penalty-shootout victory over Glentoran.

A fourth-place finish in the league meant Lynch's side competed in the end-of-season play-offs for a European place, where they duly saw off Glenavon and Cliftonville to secure a spot in the Europa Conference League qualifiers.

McDaid scored the club's first-ever European goal as two 1-0 victories over Welsh outfit Bala Town in the first qualifying round set up a date with Danish side AGF Aarhus.

Larne stunned the Danes with a 2-1 victory at Inver Park in the first leg and then they secured a 1-1 draw at Ceres Park in Denmark's second city.

The club eventually bowed out in the third qualifying round with a defeat to Portuguese side Pacos de Ferreira. They lost the first game 4-0, but salvaged plenty of pride in the second leg with a 1-0 win at Inver Park. Agonisingly, Pacos' reward was a two-legged tie with Tottenham Hotspur.

More money was invested ahead of the 2021-22 season as Lynch's side retained the County Antrim Shield, this time defeating Linfield 1-0 in the final. Although they finished a disappointing fifth in the league, European football was once again secured via the play-offs with wins over Coleraine and Glentoran, but they fell at the first hurdle, knocked out by Gibraltarian side St Joseph's after a 1-0 aggregate defeat.

Perhaps that was a blessing in disguise as Larne began the 2022-23 league season determined to secure a berth in the Champions League qualifiers.

And they managed to do so in style, producing some superb performances on the way to claiming their first league title and becoming the first club from outside Belfast to collect Northern Ireland domestic football's top prize since Portadown in 2002.

When Bruce, in late 2018, announced his investment in the club by declaring that the Champions League music would sound at Inver Park one day, plenty of people scoffed. He will no doubt have a wry smile on his face when the Inver Reds take their place in the qualifying round of Europe's elite club competition this summer.

Kenny Bruce (left), the man who has transformed Larne's fortunes with a huge investment in the club, with chairman Gareth Clements
Credit: Bill Guiller/Larne FC

eye witness

Lewis Watson reports

CZECH REPUBLIC

The godfather of penalties

World Soccer takes a trip to Prague to chat to the man behind football's most famous penalty

Football legend... Antonin Panenka

Antonin Panenka barely flinches. It's 20 minutes into the final day of the regular season in the Czech First League and his team, Bohemians 1905, are awarded a penalty. The urge to deploy a jovial elbow to the 74-year-old, whose name is more associated with penalties than any other footballer in history, is irresistible.

"Believe it or not, the Panenka penalty isn't very popular in the Czech First League," he explains to *World Soccer*, as the awarded spot-kick is successfully dispatched into the bottom-left corner of the goal to put the hosts 2-0 in front. "I don't believe I have ever seen one here. It's never something that you should just do. If you don't have it, don't try it."

Despite a language barrier, Panenka's spirit and affable nature are translated through his beaming smile, sitting under his trademark moustache. It's a special day for Bohemians and he is in the party spirit. Panenka is an honorary ambassador of the side where he enjoyed the majority of his playing career between 1967-81. After fighting relegation for the nine years since their most recent promotion, the 2022-23 season is one of celebration.

"Finishing fourth in the regular season is a huge achievement for us," he adds, with help from his interpreter and friend Petr Nosalek. Bohemians had just beaten Jablonec 4-1 on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Prague to cement their spot in the Championship Group play-off finale.

"It's been an enjoyable season. In Czech we translate *Alice in Wonderland* to *Alenka v Risi Divu*, so I call this season Pan-enka in Wonderland.

"We understand that we can't compete with the top three at the moment – Sparta Prague, Slavia Prague and [Viktoria] Plzen – as we don't have the same financial backing, so unfortunately another league title is only a dream for us."

Another Czech First League title may well be a long way away for the Kangaroos, but you can't blame their supporters for beginning to dream. A pre-match parade of their heroes from their solitary Czech First League title in 1983 acts as a tease to what could materialise in the future, and their one-off retro shirts commemorate that season with style.

You'd be forgiven for assuming that Panenka was at the forefront of that successful season 40 years ago, but in fact the midfielder had by then moved to Rapid Vienna in search of greater acclaim.

"Of course, I have some regret that I wasn't able to win a league title with Bohemians, but I had plenty of success in Austria," he says. "I won two league titles with Rapid.

"A dream would have been a move to Western Europe, but under the communist regime this wasn't a possibility. In order to secure a move to, say, the English or German leagues, you had to either be over 32 years old or have won over 50 caps for the national team. In former Czechoslovakia, it was everyone's dream to move to the west and make some money."

Antonin Panenka burst into the public consciousness in the final of the 1976 European Championship. His Czechoslovakia side had been taken to penalties after a 2-2 draw with West Germany and it fell on the shoulders

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Influential... Zinedine Zidane, Andrea Pirlo and Achraf Hakimi have all scored famous Panenka penalties

of the then 27-year-old to take the fifth and final spot-kick. A miss by West Germany's Uli Hoeness opened the door for Panenka and he duly walked through it, softly chipping the ball down the centre of the goal to the bemusement of Bayern Munich goalkeeper Sepp Maier.

Czechoslovakia claimed the Euro '76 title, and in doing so became the first team to win an international tournament on penalties. Since known as "The Panenka", Antonin's method of converting the spot-kick has joined the "Cruyff Turn" and the "Fosbury Flop" as sporting eponyms, securing his place in the annals of football history.

"It gives me great joy and pride to see famous names using this penalty method nearly 50 years on," he continues. "I really enjoy the fact that reporters still mention my name each time. Achraf Hakimi's in the World Cup quarter-final was a great example of how to convert one successfully, but it's not fool-proof.

"It took a lot of practise for me to be

confident about using it in a game. The secret is to deceive the goalkeeper and be 100 per cent sure that he thinks you will be picking a corner. A huge part of it is acting – with your eyes, your body language and your behaviour before the penalty. It's not something that you can just decide to do on the day.

"I perfected this technique over years of training with the Bohemians goalkeeper Zdenek Hruska. I had missed two penalties in a league match against Plzen so decided to bet with Hruska – usually for beer, chocolate and money – that I could score more than he could save. I would lie awake at night thinking of ways to beat him and then the Panenka technique came to mind. The only issue was that I became fat due to the amount of beer I was winning.

"Goalkeepers always wait until the very last second to dive either left or right, and they won't want to just stay in the middle of the goal in fear of looking stupid. If I could lightly chip it down the middle of the goal, then the goalkeeper wouldn't have the time to return to the middle and catch the ball."

Panenka would drill this technique multiple times in training before announcing to his Czechoslovakia room-mate, and goalkeeper, Ivo Viktor that he was going to use this penalty if required in the European Championship final. Viktor and their coach Vaclav Jezek were dubious of this decision, but Panenka was stubborn and unwilling to change his mind.

But was this decision the fearlessness of youth? Or the pure confidence in a well-drilled technique?

"I would still take this penalty today if I went back to 1976," he confirms. "I took over 30 Panenkas over my career and only missed one, so to this day I am still convinced it is a workable method of penalty taking. You just have to convince the goalkeeper you are going to do something different – maybe it's not something I could do now at 74 [laughs], I'd be lucky if the ball reached the goal.

> **"If I had a koruna for every time someone asked me about this penalty, I would be a very rich man"**

"I have seen this penalty referred to as 'disrespectful' to the goalkeeper, but I don't believe that a Panenka can ever be disrespectful. It is just a simple method of scoring a goal – after all, it is you against the goalkeeper and you have to do all you can to win that duel."

These days Panenka acts in an ambassadorial role for Bohemians. He stresses that he isn't a decision-maker for the club, but is the "face" of the club, speaking with press and potential partners. It's a role that is comparable to his playing career – a free role to express himself in a way only he knows.

Walking inside the Dolicek Stadium among the fans, Panenka – surprisingly – isn't mobbed. He is recognised, of course, but in this small corner of Prague he is simply considered a part of the furniture.

"To be honest, I am more famous across Europe," he admits. "It's a bit of a cult following. In Spain, Panenka is a term in their dictionary and there is a magazine that is named after me. The penalty is also used more in the bigger leagues across Europe – perhaps as it takes a lot of skill and practise – and less so in the Czech Republic."

He refuses to pinpoint a player that he would be happy to be compared to in today's game but alludes to the intelligent, creative and laid-back style that he enjoys watching of Maradona and Cruyff. He still exudes modesty despite being constantly referenced as one of football's mavericks.

He calls it a "privilege" that he is still asked about that penalty to this day but also admits that it's regrettable that the rest of his career has been swallowed up by this story. "If I had a koruna for every time someone asked me about this penalty, I would be a very rich man," he jests. "But in reality I am still so pleased that the idea of this penalty still exists and is being used to this day."

As he walks over to the bar in the VIP lounge and pours a cold beer for himself and *World Soccer*, this writer concludes by asking him how he would like to be remembered. Words such as "madman", "genius" and "poet" have been used in previous descriptions, but Panenka doesn't like any of these.

"Just a guy that enjoyed the beautiful game. And someone that tried to do anything he could to be original and put a smile on the face of the fans."

Recognition... Panenka receives the Golden Foot Legends award back in 2014

eye witness

Lukas Vrablik reports

LUXEMBOURG

Minnows no longer

Why Luxembourg are dreaming of a first major international tournament

Luxembourg technical director...Manuel Cardoni

Luxembourg aren't football minnows anymore. In the past, as they admit, they went into some games hoping not to lose too badly, or dreaming of scoring a goal. Now, however, things are changing. The team, which has participated in every single World Cup qualifying campaign since 1934 and taken part in the the European Championship qualifiers since 1964, is starting to think about reaching a major tournament.

"Maybe," says Manuel Cardoni to *World Soccer* with a smile. "We can dream."

Between 1993 and 2004, he won 69 caps for Luxembourg, and confirms that football in the country is on the rise. Now, as the country's technical director and manager of the youth teams, he is overseeing an improvement in Luxembourg's fortunes thanks to a combination of an increased number of skilful players and a long-term strategy.

For now, Cardoni is content with ensuring that progress continues, but a spot at Euro 2024 is not out of the question.

The qualifying campaign began with a point in a 0-0 draw with Slovakia, supposedly one of the best teams in the group, although the next game was a setback: a 6-0 defeat against group favourites Portugal.

> "We had to create the structure, then improve the structure...it was a whole pathway, not only about changing one detail. We have always had talents in Luxembourg, but they needed a concept to improve"
> **Luxembourg technical director Manuel Cardoni**

"We had a bad day," says Dan Elvinger, a journalist at the daily newspaper *Luxemburger Tageblatt*. "They caught us with long balls and it was too easy for them to score. Even if nobody was expecting a point against Portugal, the fans wanted a closer game."

There still are plenty of games to go, and Luxembourg maintain the ambition to fight with Slovakia, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Iceland for second

place, while their performance in the 2022-23 UEFA Nations League gives them a reasonable chance of at least qualifying for the play-offs. That's a far cry from Cardoni's era.

"We weren't as good as Luxembourg now, but we had great atmosphere and friendships in the dressing room," he says. "It was a pleasure to play with friends, but we didn't have enough quality. We tried not to lose too highly – sometimes we were happy to score a goal."

For Cardoni, the Euro '96 qualifiers remain a highlight: "We hadn't won an official game for 22 years. In February 1995, we played away against Malta. They were on our level, so suddenly we felt pressure. We won, I scored the only goal and our goalkeeper saved a penalty in stoppage-time."

Minnows no longer... Luxembourg players celebrate scoring against Portugal in the 2022 World Cup qualifiers

Head coach ...Luc Holtz

Luxembourg ended that campaign with ten points – still the country's record in a qualifying campaign – and another famous win over Czech Republic, who would go on to reach the final of the Euros a year later. Still, when Cardoni

compares it to the current era, with fans disappointed after the Portugal defeat, it's clear that the team has come a long way – even if the rest of Europe haven't quite noticed yet.

Last year, Luxembourg drew with Turkey (3-3) and Hungary (2-2), and in the 2022 World Cup qualifiers beat Republic of Ireland (1-0) and won twice against Azerbaijan. Yet according to Elvinger, that hasn't changed a general perception of Luxembourg as outsiders.

"We still think that a lot of people consider us to be minnows," he said. "I remember going to Azerbaijan, and locals thought that their team would beat us easily. It was the same in Ireland. Of course Ireland is a better team, but if you looked at those games – which we went on to win – you would have seen that we were technically superior. Our victories were no coincidence.

"I think the only way to ensure that not everyone thinks they will win 5-0 against us is to qualify for Euro 2024. Otherwise we will still be described as football minnows."

The national team's coach Luc Holtz, a team-mate of Cardoni in the '90s, has been in charge since 2010 and has shaped the team to his philosophy. Luxembourg no longer approach every game just to defend furiously; they prefer an active playing style, with combinations or counter-attacks.

> "I think the only way to ensure that not everyone thinks they will win 5-0 against us is to qualify for Euro 2024. Otherwise we will still be described as football minnows"
>
> ***Tageblatt* journalist Dan Elvinger**

Luxembourg's key players...(clockwise) Leandro Barreiro, Christopher Martins and Gerson Rodrigues

There are two key players: box-to-box midfielder Leandro Barreiro of Bundesliga outfit Mainz, and defensive midfielder Christopher Martins (Spartak Moscow). Further forward, Gerson Rodrigues (on loan at Al Wehda in Saudi Arabia from Dynamo Kyiv) delivers moments of magic – such as his winning goal in Dublin – while first-choice goalkeeper Anthony Moris, who advanced to the Europa League quarter-finals this season with Union Saint-Gilloise, is also a key man.

This rise of talent in Luxembourg is no coincidence. Cardoni puts it down to a long-term process that began in 2002 with a nationwide programme of youth development and a number of new academies.

"It took us from 2002 to get here," Cardoni explains. "Firstly we had to create the structure, then improve the structure, and now we try to go step by step. It was a whole pathway, not only about changing one detail. We have always had talents in Luxembourg, but they needed a concept to improve.

"We created an academy with the idea to collect the best players and give them training sessions in the best conditions and with the best coaches."

One of the keys to success was providing a solid competition for local players, which Luxembourg is simply not able to provide. Instead, the youngsters go abroad for international opponents on a regular basis.

"In the academy, we work with our best players four days a week, from Monday to Thursday. On Wednesday, we usually play against foreign sides from neighbouring countries, like Stuttgart, Mainz, Dusseldorf, Cologne, Metz, Standard Liege, Anderlecht. We take the buses so the players have competition, because it is too low in Luxembourg."

Two decades on, a country with around 660,000 inhabitants is able to produce interesting players, who also have a different mentality to their predecessors.

"We try to train as hard as possible," says Cardoni. "From a young age, we try to really play, not only defend and hope not to lose. We try to win by playing an attacking game. Due to doing that over the last ten to 12 years, the mentality has changed and these players want to win."

Luxembourg's young footballers used to focus on getting a good job and playing amateur football during the evenings. Now, breaking into the professional game is a genuine objective, with some even moving abroad to foreign youth academies. The pool for the national team is growing wider.

The level of the domestic league remains limited, with many clubs still not fully professional. But for the best players, there is now a route to professional careers abroad that simply did not exist in the past, which is bringing positive results to the national team.

Getting to Euro 2024 no longer sounds as impossible as it did a few years ago, but Cardoni is not yet ready to describe it as a goal; that, he believes, would bring "unnecessary pressure."

"We still need to manage to work in the process, to have more professional players and for the coach to be able to put in his ideas," he says.

Even if Euro 2024 does prove to be too early, surely a major tournament appearance is not far away.

European winners... captain Tony Book collects the trophy
Credit: Alamy

ONE NIGHT IN VIENNA

How Manchester City won their first – and, at the time of writing, only – European silverware: the 1970 European Cup Winners' Cup

Words: Simon Curtis

April 29, 1970 dawned damp in Austria's capital. Malcolm Allison, the Manchester City coach, undeterred by the rain, went for a run in the Viennese woods, which – thanks to following the wrong group of joggers – took him on a nine-kilometre loop instead of the three he had planned. Like the players in his charge, however – assembled alongside manager Joe Mercer – there was never any danger of him running out of energy.

The young, exuberant City team had been built in Allison's own style: fearless, flamboyant and frisky. Already league title winners in 1968, FA Cup winners in 1969 and League Cup winners earlier in the 1969-70 season, the European Cup Winners' Cup represented another significant hurdle for the duo. And, for "Big Malc", the venue for the final could not have been more fitting.

"It wasn't the first time I had been to the Prater Stadium," said Allison many years later. "I'd done my national service in Klagenfurt and I'd seen Austria play Italy there. I'd also played on the pitch in an army game.

"It was in Austria that I first got a taste for training and coaching. I picked up things that I brought with me to England."

Allison had also travelled to see the great Hungarian side of the age, the "Magical Magyars" that featured Ferenc Puskas, Sandor Kocsis, Nandor Hidegkuti, Zoltan Czibor, Jozsef Bozsik and Gyula Grosics, which utterly captivated the Englishman.

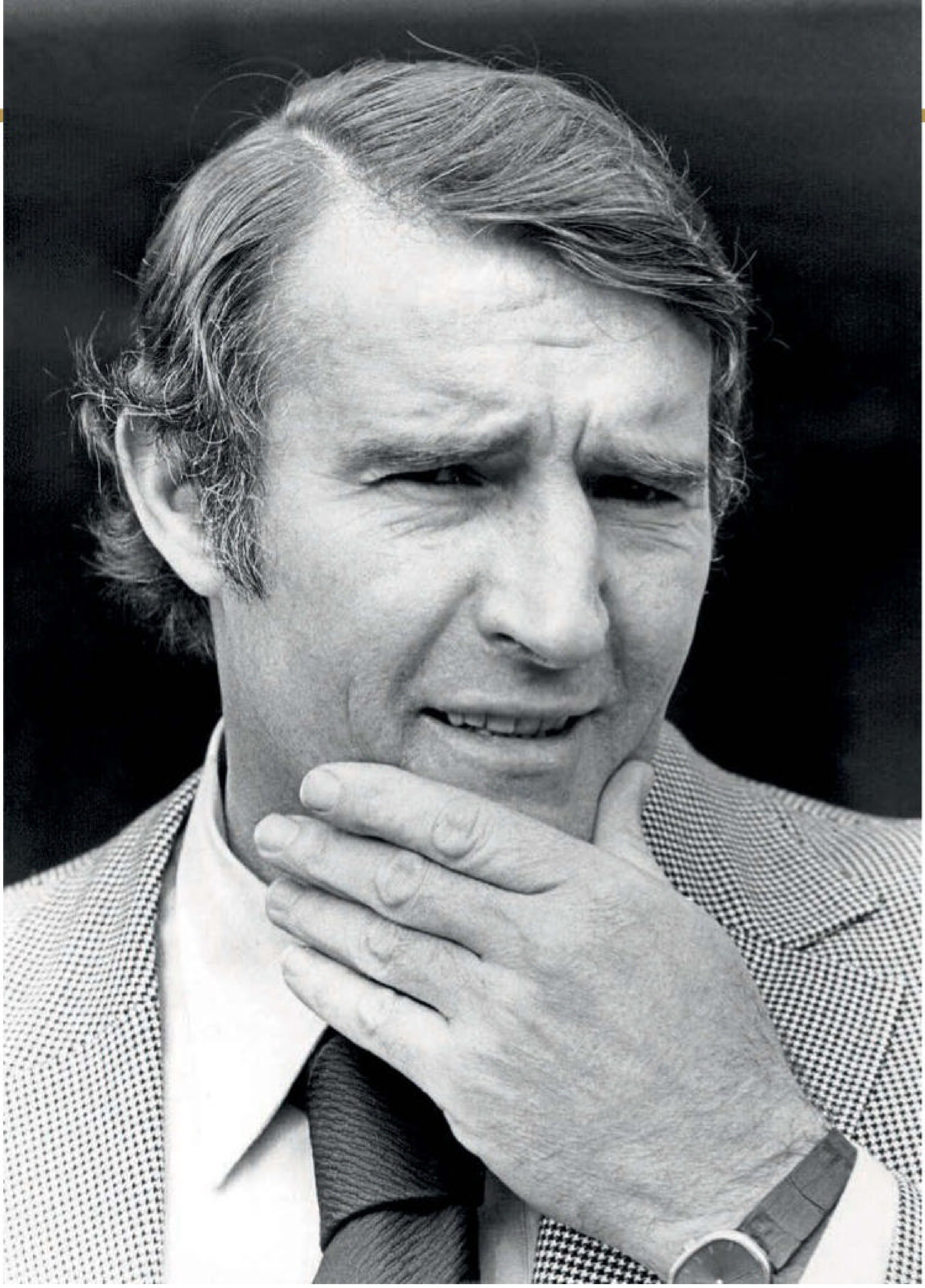
Allison's innovative mind (he was often talked of in similar terms to current City boss Pep Guardiola for his expansive and intricate thinking on the game) would allow him to take many elements of what he saw from the Austrians and Hungarians and mould them to great use, as he and Mercer took City to an unprecedented four trophies in three seasons. From new kit designs, dance sessions for better balance, specialist diets to tactical subtlety, small details were honed to give his side an advantage. Today it is unthinkable that the sides in the upper echelons of the sport would not thoroughly prepare all these elements, but in 1970 the City coach was treading a path along which few had passed before him.

Having dispatched Athletic Bilbao, Lierse, Academica de Coimbra and finally Schalke in the semi-final with a 5-1 drubbing at Maine Road, City would take on the Poles of Gornik Zabrze, talented victors over Roma in the other semi-final.

Gornik lined up with a group of players that had amassed no less than 190 Poland caps between them, a team on the crest of a domestic wave that would supply Poland's best-ever World Cup effort, going on to finish a deserved third in West Germany 1974. If City could boast the likes of Colin Bell, Mike Summerbee and Francis Lee, their opponents would field Wlodzimierz Lubanski – a wonderfully skilful attacker "in the same class as Eusebio", according to Allison – as well as a young Jerzy Gorgon, who would star at the 1974 finals.

Star winger Summerbee – despite all the efforts of the medical staff – did not make the cut.

"We tried desperately to get him fit," recalled Allison in his autobiography, *Colours of My Life*. "We gave him injections. We considered gambling on his courage and his fierce instinct for competition. But, in the end, we had to leave him out."



City coach... Malcolm Allison

In his place came the stout figure of George Heslop, hardly a like-for-like swap with the waspish winger. Heslop would slot in as a defensive foil in midfield, allowing Bell, Lee and Neil Young more freedom to run at the Poles.

In the 12th minute, the freedom Heslop's inclusion was supposed to bring saw Lee clear to cut in from the left touchline and try a pot shot at Hubert Kostka. The goalkeeper could not hold it, allowing Young to run in the loose ball, his fourth of the campaign. With Mike Doyle suffering a bad injury to his ankle, teenager Ian Bowyer came on, as the rain lashed down into the open bowl of the Prater.

Just at the most opportune moment, with the half-time break approaching, City notched a crucial second goal. Young, picking up a slovenly pass from Stanislaw Oslizlo, advanced into the penalty area down the left channel and was unceremoniously upturned by the onrushing Kostka. Lee steadied himself and tucked the ball into the net, albeit via the goalkeeper's legs.

"I had never seen rain like it. Teeming down," recalled Lee for the book *City in Europe*. "When you take a penalty, to get the accuracy needed, you have to put extra pressure on the standing foot, but I couldn't. If I'd put any more pressure on my standing foot that night, I'd have gone straight on my backside.

"It was the only penalty of all the ones I took that I just whacked hoping I'd stay on my feet. The keeper parried it with his legs, but it just carried into the net for what turned out to be the winning goal. I am still the only person who can describe what it feels like to score a winning goal for Manchester City in a European final..."

With water now visible on the pitch's

Talisman... Colin Bell

surface, Gornik began their fightback. Bell, City's talisman throughout their glory period – and an uncanny forerunner to the spirit and guile of Kevin De Bruyne in today's City side – gave away a free-kick. From there, Lubanski's trickery opened the space for Oslizlo to score past Joe Corrigan in the 68th minute.

In his autobiography, *Reluctant Hero*, Bell stated: "There had been no doubt about the game going ahead. In those days the majority of pitches were passed fit. The truth is that it was waterlogged and still would have been two days later. There were pools of water all over the place. Once we got started, the ball stuck in the mud and you would have to go back and hook it out. The pitch was like a swimming pool."

It is worth wondering how Bell's skillset would have matched De Bruyne on today's billiard-table pitches as opposed to the quagmires, mud heaps and ice rinks the players traversed in those times. The wonderfully balanced Bell, polished in everything he did, would still have an excellent claim to a place in City's best-ever midfield despite the array of talent that has been paraded in recent years.

In a second half punctuated by even more rain, the ball refused to run cleanly and Gornik were reduced to slicing hopeful long passes towards the City defence, but to no avail. City had made it to the summit. Their soaked fans made their way onto the pitch to celebrate with staff and players.

As was sometimes the case in the days when European finals featured Eastern Bloc teams, Gornik fans had been banned from travelling (the Polish government had released fewer than 100 supporters to make the trip to Austria). With more than 4,500 intrepid travellers from the north-west of England, City's support could now mainly be found on the pitch with the players.

Back home City fans were forced to wait for the late-night highlights of the game and Barry Davies' familiar voice on Sportsnight. Their club may have been making history in Vienna, but the English public were transfixed by another major final: Chelsea v Leeds United at Old Trafford, the first FA Cup replay in modern times.

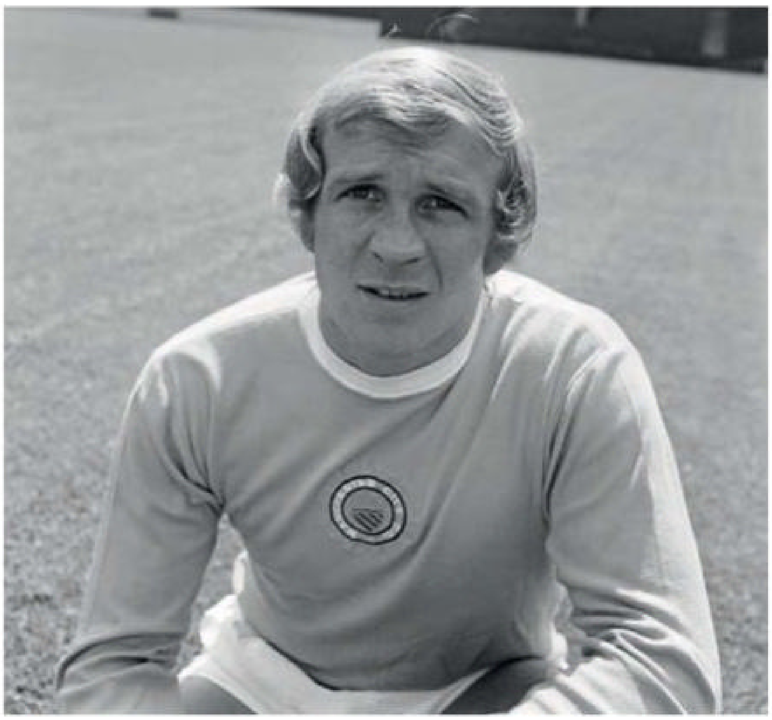
Both the BBC and ITV carried the Chelsea-Leeds game live, leaving City's noteworthy triumph to a highlights package in the post-watershed slot. The idea of a major European final not being broadcast live is unthinkable now. Even UEFA seemed to underplay City's achievement; young centre-back Tommy Booth revealed afterwards that they were handed runners-up medals instead of winners' medals during the trophy presentation.

The celebrations started in the changing rooms and went on to the opulence of the Vienna City Hall, with the players sharing the evening with their wives and their opponents, before ending at the team hotel.

> "I am still the only person who can describe what it feels like to score a winning goal for Manchester City in a European final..."
>
> **Francis Lee, the 1970 European Cup Winners' Cup final match winner**

The next morning, after barely two hours' sleep, Allison watched dawn break over the majestic spires of the city from his hotel balcony. Vienna had been host to the flourishing moments of early manhood, as his ambitions and ideas began to crystallise into something more serious. "I could not have imagined that Vienna would be the climax to the rampaging years which had carried Manchester City out of the shadows of Manchester United and into the forefront of English and European football. I saw Vienna as simply a milestone on a road to be littered with broken opponents."

Match winner ...Francis Lee



But Allison was wrong; instead of the start of something, the final proved to be the end. In landing their first European trophy, City were also landing their last. They went close to defending their trophy, reaching the semi-finals in 1970-71, only to lose to Chelsea. Allison left two years later, having only added the 1972 Charity Shield to his collection of trophies. Lee left a year after that and then, in 1975, Bell sustained the knee injury that would mar the rest of his career. City played in Europe three more times towards the end of the 1970s, but then not again until 2003.

Now, 53 years on from that famous night, the club is writing new chapters of their continental story. By the time you're reading this, the indefatigable Pep Guardiola and his charges may finally have matched the mercurial talents of their predecessors.
But it all began in Vienna.

Simon Curtis is the author of *City in Europe: From Allison to Guardiola, Manchester City's Long Quest for European Glory*, published by Icon Books

United States chaos hands advantage to World Cup co-hosts

Canada and Mexico can take advantage of USA's off-field issues at the 17th CONCACAF Gold Cup

For holders and co-hosts the United States, the last few months have been nothing short of chaotic off the field. It began in the aftermath of the World Cup with a row over Giovanni Reyna. The Borussia Dortmund midfielder played less than an hour in Qatar, despite calls for his inclusion from both fans and media, and after the USA's elimination at the hands of the Netherlands his attitude was questioned by head coach Gregg Berhalter. In response, Reyna's parents – including former USA midfielder Claudio – brought to the US Soccer Federation's attention a decades-old allegation of a domestic abuse incident involving Berhalter. While the federation investigated, the coach's contract was allowed to lapse and, for now, interim boss Anthony Hudson will lead the team.

Hudson is well regarded and has managed at senior international level previously, with Bahrain and New Zealand, but left the latter six years ago. He will take charge of a strong squad, but will be concerned by the lack of opportunities at Chelsea for key forward Christian Pulisic and the broken arm suffered by Fulham defender Tim Ream.

The USA's closest Group A challengers will be Jamaica, who were runners-up in 2015 and 2017. Icelandic coach Heimir Hallgrimsson has a decent squad, which has been boosted in recent years by the addition of English-born players such as Michail Antonio (West Ham United), Ethan Pinnock (Brentford) and Bobby Decordova-Reid (Fulham), although Aston Villa's Leon Bailey and Spartak Moscow's Shamar Nicholson, both from Kingston, should pose the main threat up front. Goalkeeper and captain Andre Blake leads a significant MLS-based contingent of the squad too.

Both sides should be too strong for Nicaragua, who qualified directly after surprisingly winning their Nations League group ahead of Trinidad & Tobago. A qualifier makes up the group and that will be either Curacao – who could offer more of a challenge – Saint Kitts & Nevis, French Guiana or Sint Maarten.

In Group B, Mexico are the favourites but they will find the competition much harder than their great rivals in Group A.

Off the field, the administration of Haitian football is in chaos but the team dropped just two points in winning their Nations League group to qualify, while striker Duckens Nazon has been in good form in Bulgaria for CSKA Sofia.

The last of Honduras' three World Cup finals appearances was in 2014, but Andy Najar of D.C. United will be a rock in defence and Cadiz striker Anthony Lozano vital in attack.

Group B also includes guests Qatar, who made the 2021 Gold Cup semi-finals and have been invited back. The experienced Carlos Queiroz has taken over as head coach after the Middle Eastern kingdom's woeful performance when hosting last year's World Cup. With some countries privately questioning why a place in their confederation's premier tournament is being taken up by Qatar, whose airline is one of the main sponsors, Queiroz's side will have little support outside of CONCACAF's commercial department.

> Aron Winter's Suriname are probably the strongest team outside of the main draw and may produce a surprise

Group C is equally tight with Costa Rica the marginal favourites to come out on top. Despite playing at six World Cups, they have not won the Gold Cup in its current iteration. Colombian head coach Luis Fernando Suarez has a highly experienced squad, but their problems may come up front with goals drying up for the experienced Joel Campbell.

Panama edged out Costa Rica for a place in the Nations League finals and Thomas Christiansen's increasingly effective side could be the Gold Cup's dark horses. An experienced defence featuring players at the top level in Europe, such as right-back Michael Murillo who plays for Anderlecht in Belgium, will be hard to break down. At 34, striker Gabriel Torres – now playing in Venezuela for Zamora FC – will know not many more Gold Cup finals lay ahead.

Since beating Grenada in the Nations League in June 2022, Hugo Perez's El

Talisman... Canada star Alphonso Davies

Costa Rica coach... Luis Fernando Suarez

Gold Cup favourites ...USA's James Sands and Ozziel Herrera of Mexico compete during April's friendly between the two countries

Salvador have been on a poor run but will be competitive. A qualifier makes up the group and that is likely to be Aron Winter's Suriname – who are probably the strongest team outside of the main draw and may produce a surprise – though Martinique, Saint Lucia and Puerto Rico are also in contention for that spot.

John Herdman's exciting Canada should be too good for Group D. Likely qualifiers Trinidad & Tobago – who are vying with Guadeloupe, Guyana and Grenada – may offer some challenge, while Guatemala and Cuba did both win their second-tier Nations League groups to qualify, but the co-hosts have quality attacking players in Jonathan David, Cyle Larin and Alphonso Davies. The bulk of Guatemala's squad play in the domestic league, but Luis Fernando Tena's side may offer more of a challenge to Canada than Cuba.

Pablo Elier Sanchez's men won five of their six Nations League games and include players from across the globe, but Cuba's main impact at the Gold Cup has been off the pitch. Players seeking asylum has been a recurrent problem, while Cuba did not even show up for their preliminary match in 2021.

This innovative structure including a preliminary round staged in the host country has helped the Gold Cup mature into a significant tournament that will serve as good preparation for the 2026 World Cup, which the USA, Canada and Mexico will co-host. A Gold Cup winner looks likely to come from one of that trio.

SCHEDULE

GROUP A		
June 24	**USA v Jamaica**	Soldier Field, Chicago
June 25	**Nicaragua v TBC**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
June 28	**Jamaica v Nicaragua**	CityPark, St. Louis
June 28	**TBC v USA**	CityPark, St. Louis
July 2	**USA v Nicaragua**	Bank of America Stadium, Charlotte
July 2	**Jamaica v TBC**	Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara
GROUP B		
June 25	**Haiti v Qatar**	NRG Stadium, Houston
June 25	**Mexico v Honduras**	NRG Stadium, Houston
June 29	**Qatar v Honduras**	State Farm Stadium, Glendale
June 29	**Haiti v Mexico**	State Farm Stadium, Glendale
July 2	**Honduras v Haiti**	Bank of America Stadium, Charlotte
July 2	**Mexico v Qatar**	Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara
GROUP C		
June 26	**El Salvador v TBC**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
June 26	**Costa Rica v Panama**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
June 30	**TBC v Panama**	Red Bull Arena, Harrison
June 30	**El Salvador v Costa Rica**	Red Bull Arena, Harrison
July 4	**Costa Rica v TBC**	Red Bull Arena, Harrison
July 4	**Panama v El Salvador**	Shell Energy Stadium, Houston
GROUP D		
June 27	**Canada v TBC**	BMO Field, Toronto
June 27	**Guatemala v Cuba**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
July 1	**Cuba v TBC**	Shell Energy Stadium, Houston
July 1	**Guatemala v Canada**	Shell Energy Stadium, Houston
July 4	**TBC v Guatemala**	Red Bull Arena, Harrison
July 4	**Canada v Cuba**	Shell Energy Stadium, Houston
QUARTER-FINALS		
(1) July 8	**Winner Group B v Runner-up Group C**	AT&T Stadium, Arlington
(2) July 8	**Winner Group C v Runner-up Group B**	AT&T Stadium, Arlington
(3) July 9	**Winner Group D v Runner-up Group A**	TQL Stadium, Cincinnati
(4) July 9	**Winner Group A v Runner-up Group D**	TQL Stadium, Cincinnati
SEMI-FINALS		
(5) July 12	**Winner Match 3 v Winner Match 1**	Snapdragon Stadium, San Diego/ Allegiant Stadium, Las Vegas
(6) July 12	**Winner Match 4 v Winner Match 2**	Snapdragon Stadium, San Diego/ Allegiant Stadium, Las Vegas
FINAL		
July 16		SoFi Stadium, Inglewood

LVI
SoFi Stadium
#SBLVI
RAMS

2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup final venue...the SoFi Stadium hosted last year's NFL Super Bowl

Underdogs and lightweights

From Caribbean minnows to former World Cup qualifiers, 12 teams will play-off for the three remaining places at the 2023 Gold Cup

The dizzying heights of the 2006 World Cup feel like a long time ago for Trinidad & Tobago. It is an achievement they have rarely looked like repeating, while the domestic game is being suffocated by a FIFA normalisation committee. Their last two appearances combined at the Gold Cup yielded no wins and only two goals scored; this time they may not even qualify.

Managed by former "Soca Warriors" stalwart Angus Eve, Trinidad & Tobago begin the preliminaries with a tough start against Guadeloupe. The French territory's side is not as strong as the one that reached the last four in 2007, but Guadeloupe qualified for the last finals. If coach Jocelyn Angloma, the former France international, can secure all his European players, they will pose a major challenge. Andreaw Gravillon, who recently joined Torino on loan from Reims, Union Berlin left-back Jerome Roussillon and Oostende forward Thierry Ambrose would all make a significant difference.

The top section of the draw is the most even, and if Trinidad & Tobago can get past Guadeloupe their opponents could be Guyana, where former Soca Warriors boss Jamaal Shabazz is now in his fourth spell in charge. A diverse Golden Jaguars squad includes players from Thailand, New Zealand and Romania plus the lower reaches of the English pyramid. Midfielder Nathan Moriah-Welsh, who is on the books at English Premier League side Bournemouth, and striker Omari Glasgow from Chicago Fire II could make the difference against Grenada.

After drawing 2-2 at home to El Salvador in the top tier of the latest Nations League campaign, Grenada finished bottom of their group following a 7-1 thrashing at home to the United States. Ex-Wolverhampton Wanderers manager Terry Connor has been named as new head coach and, like predecessor Anthony Modeste, will likely look to recruit from the diaspora in England.

Saint Lucia are the underdogs against Martinique but could spring a surprise after coach Stern John and Saint Lucia FA advisor Brent Sancho visited the UK in April looking for eligible players to bolster their squad. Wycombe Wanderers' 23-year-old Chris Forino, Gillingham's Cheye Alexander and Ipswich Town's Janoi Donacien will all bring Football League quality to their defence. Nahum Melvin-Lambert, who spent last season on loan at Weymouth from Reading, and experienced striker Dominic Poleon, who was most recently at Ebbsfleet, will add bite in attack. "Fingers crossed we get their passports in time," says Sancho.

> "Fingers crossed we get their passports in time"
>
> Saint Lucia FA advisor Brent Sancho on the team's new players

Martinique, who finished bottom of their Nations League group, have some players playing professionally in Europe,

Potential Gold Cup star... Suriname striker Gleofilo Vijter

Top experience... Curacao midfielder Juninho Bacuna

Hopeful...Trinidad & Tobago will be aiming for a better showing if they can progess past the preliminaries

New recruit... Ipswich Town defender Janoi Donacien will play for Saint Lucia

but the French territory remain reliant on veteran captain Daniel Herelle, who plays on the island.

The winners are almost certain to face the unenviable task of taking on Aron Winter's Suriname side. After a starry career with Ajax, Lazio and Internazionale and 84 caps for the Netherlands, the classy midfielder returned home for his first senior management post. With a squad drawn from as far afield as Japan (goalkeeper Warner Hahn with Kyoto Sanga) and Germany (winger Sheraldo Becker at Union Berlin), they should qualify for the finals, where striker Gleofilo Vlijter – currently with Israeli side Hapoel Ramat Gan – could make an impact.

Opponents Puerto Rico strolled through a weak Nations League group thanks to six goals from Ricardo Rivera, who plays for Spanish lower league side CD Bunol, but Charlie Trout's team do not look to have sufficient quality to stop Suriname.

Just making the Gold Cup preliminaries has been a footballing highpoint in itself for another Dutch territory. Sint Maarten surpassed their own expectations in winning their group in League C of the Nations League to qualify for the prelims.

Gene Kemble, secretary of the Sint Maarten Football Federation, says: "Most players are based in the Netherlands. We will most likely call up the same players for the Gold Cup prelims."

Only Ronan Olivacce is at a Dutch top-flight side with the teenage defender on the fringes at Excelsior Rotterdam, but Sint Maarten do have the Nations League top goalscorer in Gerwin Lake, who plays for SV Poortugaal in the Dutch fifth tier.

Sint Maarten's opponents French Guiana have been unconvincing so far this year but have a far stronger domestic pool plus players in France, such as young right-back Thomas Nemouthe at Creteil, and should prevail.

The winners will most likely face Curacao, who have not won a game in regular time since beating Honduras in San Pedro Sula in the Nations League last year. The Dutch island have played some high-profile friendlies, including a "coming home" game for World Cup winners Argentina. That resulted in a 7-0 thumping in Santiago del Estero, but a squad with the experience of Cuco Martina and the Bacuna brothers, Juninho and Leandro, should see off a Saint Kitts & Nevis team drawn mainly from the country's domestic top flight and lower lights of the English non-league scene.

SCHEDULE

FIRST ROUND		
(1) June 16	**Trinidad & Tobago v Guadeloupe**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
(2) June 16	**Martinique v Saint Lucia**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
(3) June 16	**Curacao v Saint Kitts & Nevis**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
(4) June 17	**French Guiana v Sint Maarten**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
(5) June 17	**Suriname v Puerto Rico**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
(6) June 17	**Guyana v Grenada**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
SECOND ROUND		
(7) June 20	**Winner Match 1 v Winner Match 6**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
(8) June 20	**Winner Match 2 v Winner Match 5**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale
(9) June 20	**Winner Match 3 v Winner Match 4**	DRV PNK Stadium, Fort Lauderdale

6 of the best CONCACAF Gold Cup stars

Steve Menary highlights six players to keep an eye on during this summer's tournament

1 Alphonso DAVIES
(CANADA)

Born in Ghana to Liberian parents, Davies moved to Canada aged five and joined the Vancouver Whitecaps residency programme ten years later. In 2018, after 12 goals in 81 games for the Caps, Bayern Munich signed him for $22 million – then a record for an MLS player. By then he was already a Canada international, having made his debut at the age of 16, and last year he scored his country's first-ever World Cup goal.

Fast and with good ball control, the versatile Davies is used higher up the pitch for John Herdman's side than he is at club level – as he demonstrated in Qatar, where only one player completed more dribbles during the group stage.

Alongside Mexico, Canada are likely to be USA's biggest challengers for the title, and Davies is sure to be at the heart of any success.

2 Leon BAILEY
(JAMAICA)

Arguably the best player in Caribbean football, Bailey has enjoyed a good Premier League season on the wing for an Aston Villa side that have finished the season as impressively as anyone.

Bailey was born in Kingston and took the hard way to the top with spells as a junior in the Phoenix Academy, Austrian side Liefering and Slovak club AS Trencin, and then Genk in Belgium. Eight goals in 56 league appearances took him to Bayer Leverkusen in 2017, where he continued to improve, eventually earning a reported £30m move to Aston Villa.

A dispute with the Jamaican FA meant that he didn't make his international debut until 2019, but he will now be a key man in the Reggae Boyz's attempts to break the North American stranglehold on the Gold Cup.

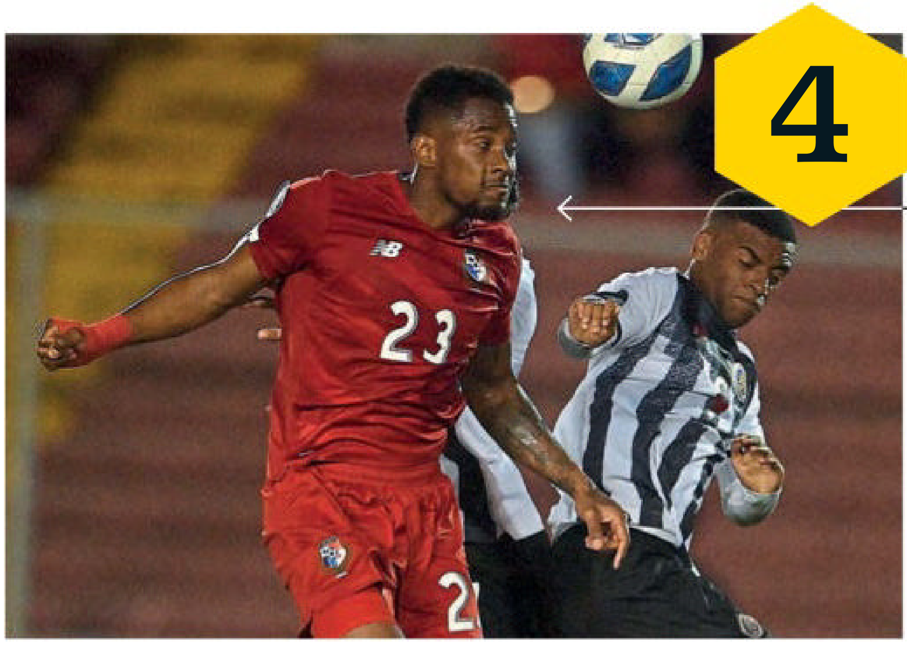
3

Hirving LOZANO

(MEXICO)

A key component of Napoli's thrilling title-winning side, the winger known as "Chucky" was the Italian club's record signing when he was bought from PSV for €42m in 2019. When he was starting out in LigaMX for Pachuca, a host of clubs – including Manchester United, Manchester City, Benfica and Ajax – were linked with a move, before he chose the Dutch giants. Lozano kept up his scoring rate in the Eredivisie with 34 goals in 60 games, attracting Napoli's interest.

Right-footed and versatile, he is a regular source of assists and goals for both club and country. A good Gold Cup performance from Lozano will be vital if Mexico are to add to their record haul of eight titles.



4

Michael MURILLO

(PANAMA)

A regular in Panama's defence for the past seven years, Murillo is currently playing for Anderlecht. The Belgian club have had a poor season – notwithstanding their run to the Europa Conference League quarter-finals – but a good performance at the Gold Cup could provide Murillo with a route to the Premier League.

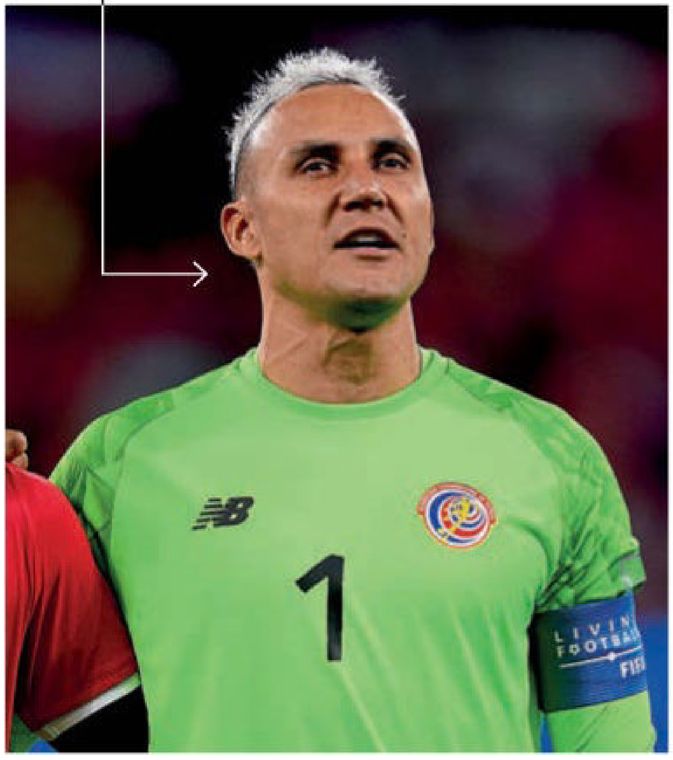
The 27-year-old spent three years in MLS with New York Red Bulls and then moved to Belgium after playing two of Panama's games at the 2018 World Cup.

Hard-working, brave and composed on the ball, he is much admired by Burnley boss Vincent Kompany, and the Clarets are likely to be among those linked with a summer swoop if Murillo catches the eye at the Gold Cup.

5

Keylor NAVAS

(COSTA RICA)



The veteran captain of Costa Rica is one of the most successful Central American players of all time and shows no sign of letting up. The former Real Madrid goalkeeper made his Premier League debut earlier this year after joining Nottingham Forest on loan from Paris Saint-Germain.

The 36-year-old made his *Los Ticos* debut 15 years ago and has since played in three World Cups and was CONCACAF Goalkeeper of the Year from 2016 to 2018.

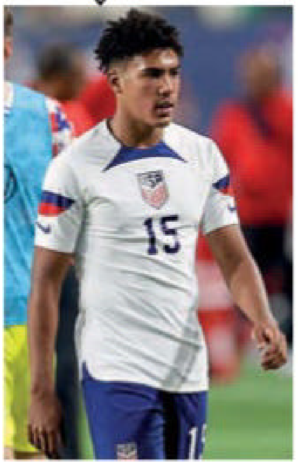
In Qatar, he recovered from conceding seven goals against Spain to produce a clean sheet in the next game against Japan. Energetic and agile, Navas is the rock that *Los Ticos*' Gold Cup challenge will be built on.

6

Caleb WILEY

(USA)

The 18-year-old made his senior USA debut in April – a little over a year after his first MLS appearance. Already a regular for Atlanta United, with over 2,000 minutes in the last 12 months, he cut his teeth for their reserves in the USL Championship, where he debuted aged just 16.



Extremely highly rated, the defender was included in *AmericanSoccerNow.com's* 20 young Americans to watch in 2023, and was also ranked fourth in CIES Football Observatory's recent list of the best Under-20 left-backs in the world.

His Gold Cup game time may be more limited but, with some of USA's defence ageing, Wiley is one to watch.

TOMORROW'S STARS TODAY

Talentscout

[EURO U21 STARLETS]

Words Nick Bidwell

Thijs DALLINGA

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT DALLINGA

- No Dutchman has scored more goals in any of Europe's top five leagues this season than the Toulouse striker.
- Dallinga's girlfriend is a leading Dutch volleyball player.
- He forms part of Toulouse's "Dutch Connection", which also features midfielders Branco van den Boomen, Stijn Spierings and Zakaria Aboukhlal.

Netherlands & Toulouse

In a sentence

A virtuoso goalscorer who has rapidly gone from the relative anonymity of the Dutch second division to top of the bill in France's Ligue 1.

What they say

"He is in the form of his life. He plays with high energy and great willpower and confidence. He has the versatility, the movement, as well as the physical and mental attributes"

Excelsior head coach Marinus Dijkhuizen

"Dutch clubs such as Groningen and Feyenoord were asleep at the wheel when Dallinga left Excelsior for Toulouse last summer"

Former Netherlands, Ajax and PSV striker Wim Kieft

The story so far

Up until a couple of years ago, Dallinga was anything but a household name in his native land. Despite winning caps for the Dutch Under-19s in 2018, he spent the early part of his professional career on the fringes of the action, only appearing sporadically for the likes of Emmen and his hometown club Groningen where, in three seasons (2018-21), he did not start a single Eredivisie game. Requiring game time, he moved to second-tier Excelsior in Rotterdam on a free transfer in the summer of 2021 and sprung into life, topping the division's marksmanship charts in 2021-22 with 32 goals, including a pair of four goal-hauls against Den Bosch and Telstar.

In July of last year, he made the surprise announcement that he was joining newly-promoted Ligue 1 side Toulouse in a cut-price deal worth €2.5 million. Initially, he found the going tough in the French top flight but, as the New Year kicked in, so did he, scoring like clockwork. Particularly impressive in the club's recent French Cup triumph, he scored six goals en route to the trophy, including two in the 5-1 thrashing of Nantes in the final.

> "Dutch clubs were asleep at the wheel when Dallinga left Excelsior last summer"
>
> Former Netherlands striker Wim Kieft

Made his first steps on the football ladder with FC Siddeburen and VW Hoogezand in the Groningen region before joining the Emmen academy at the age of 12. Made his debut for the Dutch Under-21s against Belgium in September of last year.

The next step

While a number of Dutch pundits are talking confidently of Dallinga moving back home to play for one of the big guns in the Netherlands, it is not a realistic scenario. German, Italian and English clubs are already on his case, and Toulouse – who have him under contract until 2026 – may well find the resultant quick profit hard to resist.

Much will depend on the player's mindset. After winning the first trophy of his career, staying put is not out of the question, particularly with a Europa League campaign to look forward to. Alternatively, he might think that a bigger stage will be more helpful to his senior national team ambitions.

Strengths

Boasts impeccable instincts as a penalty-area predator, invariably on the end of chances in the box. Can hit the target with either foot and is particularly skilful at nipping in front of a marker to apply the finishing touch. Represents a constant threat with his superb movement and ability to get in behind a defensive line. Very wily when playing on the shoulder of the last defender. An expert at making himself invisible.

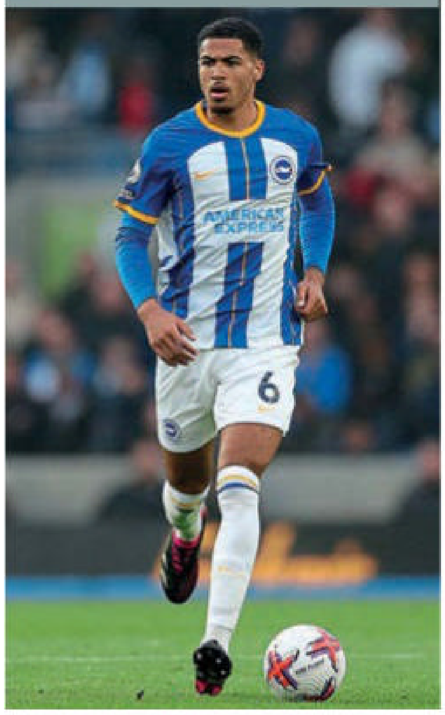
Weaknesses

Could do better in his link-up work, and a touch more physical presence would not go amiss.

Andre ALMEIDA

Portugal & Valencia
Classy Portuguese midfield all-rounder who has settled in extremely well in La Liga since joining from hometown club Vitoria Guimaraes last summer. Indeed, he has been one of the rare positive notes in a season of relegation worries at the Mestalla. Premier League sides Aston Villa and Brighton have him on their radar.

Levi COLWILL



England & Brighton (on loan from Chelsea)
Fast-improving centre-back who former West Ham, Portsmouth and Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp rightly describes as a “Rolls Royce” of a defender. Stylish and cultured on the ball, quick, strong, athletic and composed, he has starred this term at surprise packages Brighton, but could well be destined for a prominent role in 2023-24 at parent club Chelsea.

Yannik KEITEL

Germany & Freiburg
A natural choice as Germany’s captain. Even in his youth-team days, the vocal defensive midfielder was a commanding presence on the pitch and nothing has changed. He is the glue which holds the midfield together, strong in possession, a thoughtful tempo-setter, quick to process tactical matters and a robust tackler. Pushes the team forward.

Manu KONE

France & Borussia Monchengladbach
The midfield force of nature is just one of many talented French youngsters who have reaped the benefits of a stint in the Bundesliga. The former Toulouse starlet, now in his second season in Germany, is not only an indefatigable athlete and aggressive ball-winner, he is also superb in construction, always ready to destabilise the opposition with a through ball or solo spurt.

Arnau MARTINEZ

Spain & Girona
The outstanding Spanish right-back is already one of the best in La Liga in his position – not bad at all for a top-tier rookie having gained promotion with his club last season. Fast, forceful, intelligent and great going forward, he is rumoured to be on the watch-list of Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone, who apparently intends to convert him into a centre-back.

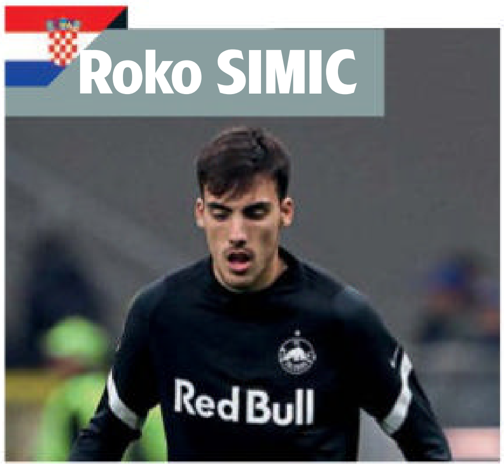
Ewoud PLETINCKX

Belgium & OH Leuven
Several of his Young Red Devils team-mates might have a higher profile but, in terms of reliability and effectiveness, the Zulte-Waregem academy graduate surpasses them all. Despite his tender years, he has already clocked up more than 100 league appearances in Belgium and has hardly missed a game for Leuven since joining them last summer.

Samuele RICCI

Italy & Torino
Equally productive as a deep-lying playmaker or box-to-box midfielder, the Torino youngster has made great strides of late, adding toughness and endurance to his upright elegance, vision and technical finery. Great at breaking through opposition lines with his nimble footwork, he has already played for the full Italy side, making his debut against Germany in June 2022.

Roko SIMIC



Croatia & FC Zurich (on loan from Red Bull Salzburg)
This gutsy, single-minded leader of the line played an instrumental part in Croatia’s qualification for the European Championship finals, scoring seven goals – including a quality hat-trick away to Azerbaijan. A classic centre-forward full of running power, dynamism and penalty-area smarts, he is the son of Dario Simic, the former Internazionale, Milan, Monaco and Croatia defender.

[EURO U19 STARLETS]

Words Nick Bidwell

Youssef CHERMITI

Portugal & Sporting

In a sentence
The latest high-end model off Sporting's production line, the tall, skilful centre-forward is enjoying a fine breakout season with the Lions.

What they say
"When an 18-year-old is playing regularly in the top flight for the Sporting first team, he has to be in a good place. He has enormous promise. Now he has to keep working and stay humble"
Former Portugal striker Pauleta

"He is yet another graduate of Sporting's excellent academy. It's great that someone so young is featuring in the club's first team. I'm certain he's going to make Sporting very happy"
Former Portugal captain Luis Figo

The story so far
Born in the Azores archipelago, an autonomous region of Portugal located in the Atlantic Ocean. The son of a Tunisian father and a Portuguese mother, he was brought up in Vila do Porto on the Santa Maria island. Sports-crazy, he shone on the futsal court for Os Marienses and GD Sao Pedro and in 11-a-side soccer at ACF Pauleta, the academy run by the ex-Portugal international Pauleta – the country's second all-time top goalscorer behind Cristiano Ronaldo. After catching the eye of Sporting scouts at a schoolboy tournament, he was soon on his way to the mainland, just 12 when inducted into the Lions' Alcochete academy.

Much to the fore as Sporting's Under-15 side won the national championship in 2018-19. Signed his first pro contract with Sporting in July 2020 (aged 16 years and two months). Voted the best academy player in Portugal for 2020. Promoted to the Sporting B team in 2021, only to be sidelined with a persistent groin problem for eight months.

Made his first-team debut as a late substitute in a 2-2 draw with Benfica in January of this year. Opened his goalscoring account with the winner in a 1-0 victory at Rio Ave in February. The following week, he headed home a consolation goal in a 2-1 home loss to Porto. Has represented Portugal at every level from the Under-15s to Under-19s.

The next step
He recently extended his contract with Sporting until the summer of 2027, a development much to the liking of head coach Ruben Amorim, who has gone on the record to say that the emergence of the youngster could save the club a lot of money in the transfer market. Sporting will hope to retain him for at least a couple more years and Youssef, a level-headed kid, would be happy to do so.

Strengths
Extraordinary physicality and aerial power, as well as top-notch hold-up play. Extremely dangerous when running with the ball at pace from deep positions. Very adept at finding space in wide areas, where he can dip into his box of flair and tricks. Packs quite a punch with his right-footed shooting.

Weaknesses
Can be inconsistent, blowing hot and cold. Has a tendency to be greedy on the ball and lose poise.

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT CHERMITI

- His cousin, Amine Chermiti, was an excellent footballer too, winning 35 caps for Tunisia and playing at club level for Hertha Berlin and Zurich.
- Like his father and brothers, the young Chermiti was very passionate about basketball. His dad Nourredine was a basketball coach in his spare time and pushed Youssef in that direction.
- His current Sporting contract contains a whopping €80 million release clause.

> "He has enormous promise"
> Portugal's second all-time top goalscorer Pauleta

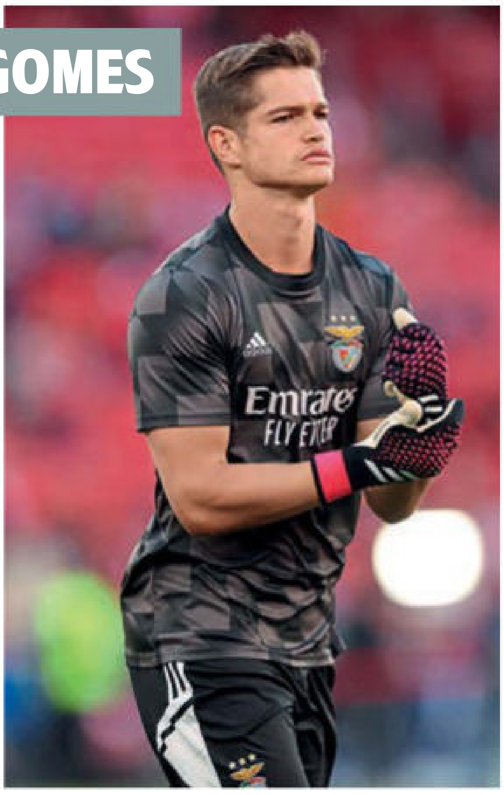
Ilias AKHOMACH

Spain & Barcelona
Whether he is employed out wide on the right wing or as a central playmaker, Spain's Under-19 skipper represents a constant threat courtesy of his otherworldly dribbling ability and his flair for embarrassing defenders. Milan and Sevilla are said to be closely monitoring him.

Alfie BRIDGMAN

Malta & Bognor Regis Town (on loan from Portsmouth)
Versatile teenager capable of making things happen on either flank or driving forward from midfield. Born and raised in southern England he qualified for the hosts through his grandmother and, since making his Under-19 debut last year, has proved a more than useful scorer. Learnt his trade at Portsmouth.

Andre GOMES

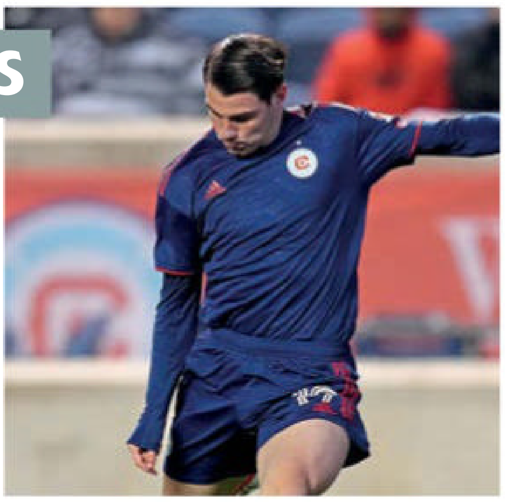


Portugal & Benfica
Portuguese football insiders are already convinced that the Benfica B keeper has what it takes to go all the way in his career. Besides showing up well for the Benfica second-string, he has been making impressive strides as an international, a starter for the U19s for the last two years and part of the U21 set-up.

Kristian HLYNSSON

Iceland & Ajax
Ajax do not tend to bring duds into their academy and this gifted number ten is certainly no lightweight, currently lighting up the Dutch second tier with the Amsterdam club's reserves (Jong Ajax). Joined Ajax from Icelandic side Breidablik on his 16th birthday in 2020. Technically accomplished with great vision and will be vital if Iceland are to get out of a tough group.

Georgios KOUTSIAS



Greece & Chicago Fire
Single-minded, effervescent and opportunistic striker, who has always been among the goals for various young Hellenic sides. Has a happy knack of being in the right place at the right time in the box and is especially menacing when turning and shooting in one fluid movement. Joined MLS outfit Chicago Fire from PAOK Salonika early this year.

Milosz MATYSIK

Poland & Jagiellonia Bialystok
Poland only conceded four goals in six qualification ties and much of that rear-guard meanness was due to the solidity, feel for danger and superb leadership qualities of their centre-back and captain. Consistent and comfortable on the ball, he has played at full-back and in defensive midfield for his club Jagiellonia Bialystok. Tipped to soon move to a top European league.

Niccolo PISILLI

Italy & Roma
The future appears exceedingly bright for the brilliant Roma box-to-box midfielder. In defensive mode, he is tenacious, hard-working and tactically aware. But what really makes him special is his work in the attacking third, his outstanding final-ball delivery and expertly-timed runs into the opposition penalty box, where he rarely fails to hit the target. Quick, well balanced and physically strong.

Andreas SCHJELDERUP

Norway & Benfica
Norwegian *wunderkind* who can spring into line-busting and goalscoring mode from a variety of positions. His favourite roles are on the left wing, as a second striker or as an attacking midfielder. He already has crammed in a lot into his short career: a boy prodigy while at Bodo/Glimt in his homeland, two outstanding years in Denmark with Nordsjaelland, and now at Benfica after a recent €10m move.

NEW INTERNATIONAL APPOINTMENTS

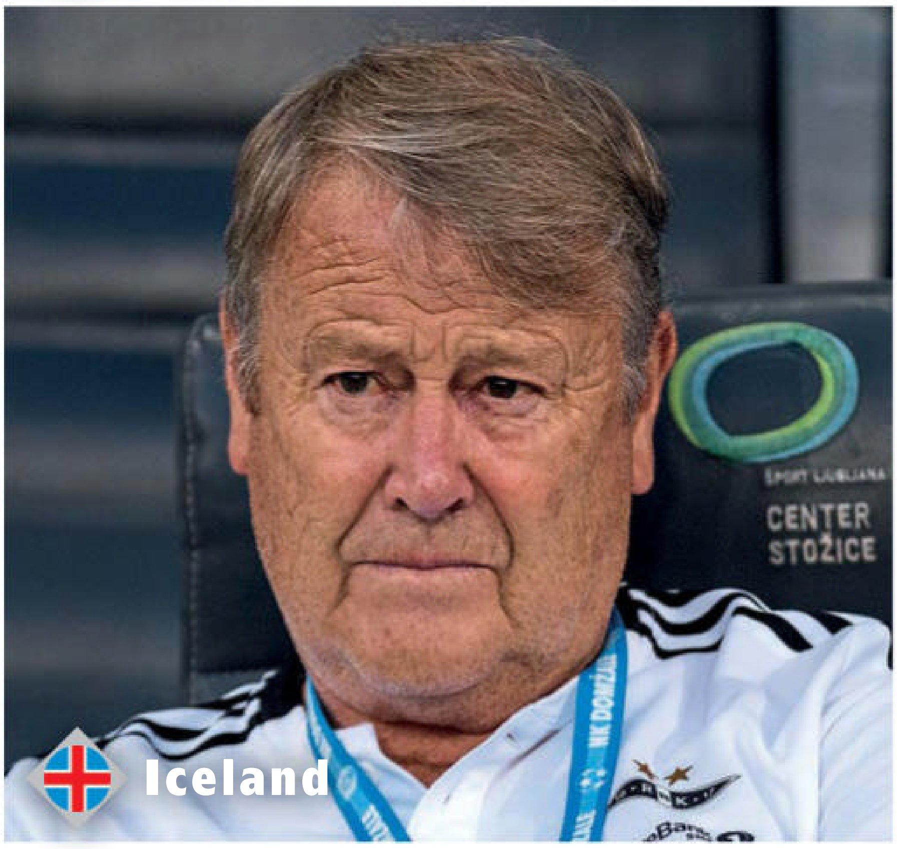
Iran

Mexico

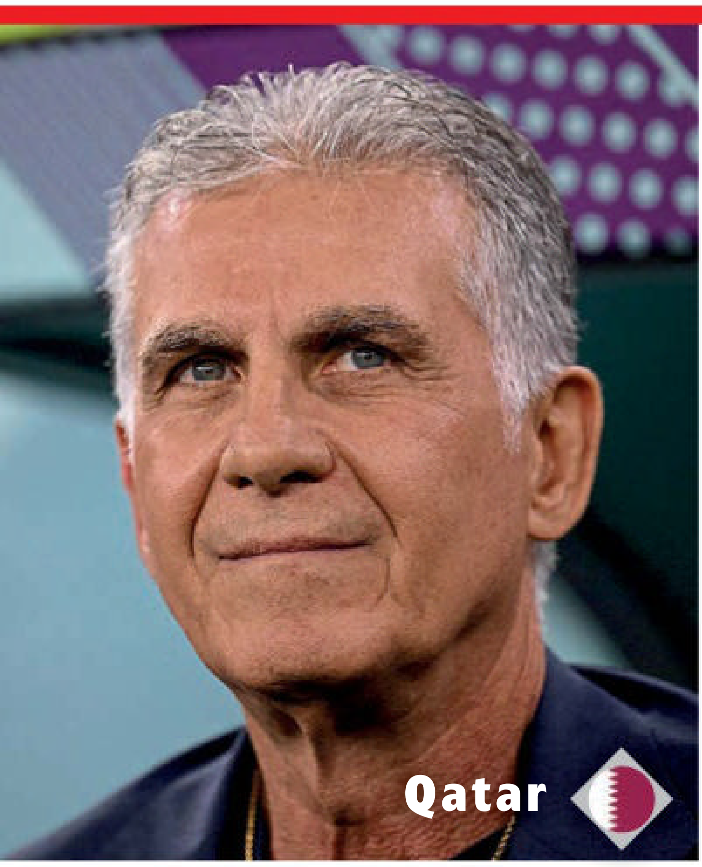
Saudi Arabia

China

Ecuador



Iceland



NEW FACES

John Duerden, Martin del Palacio Langer and **Jamie Evans** profile some of the new international managers recently appointed around the globe

SOUTH KOREA

Jurgen Klinsmann

After four years of the super-serious Paulo Bento, the smiling and breezy German has freshened things up in Seoul.

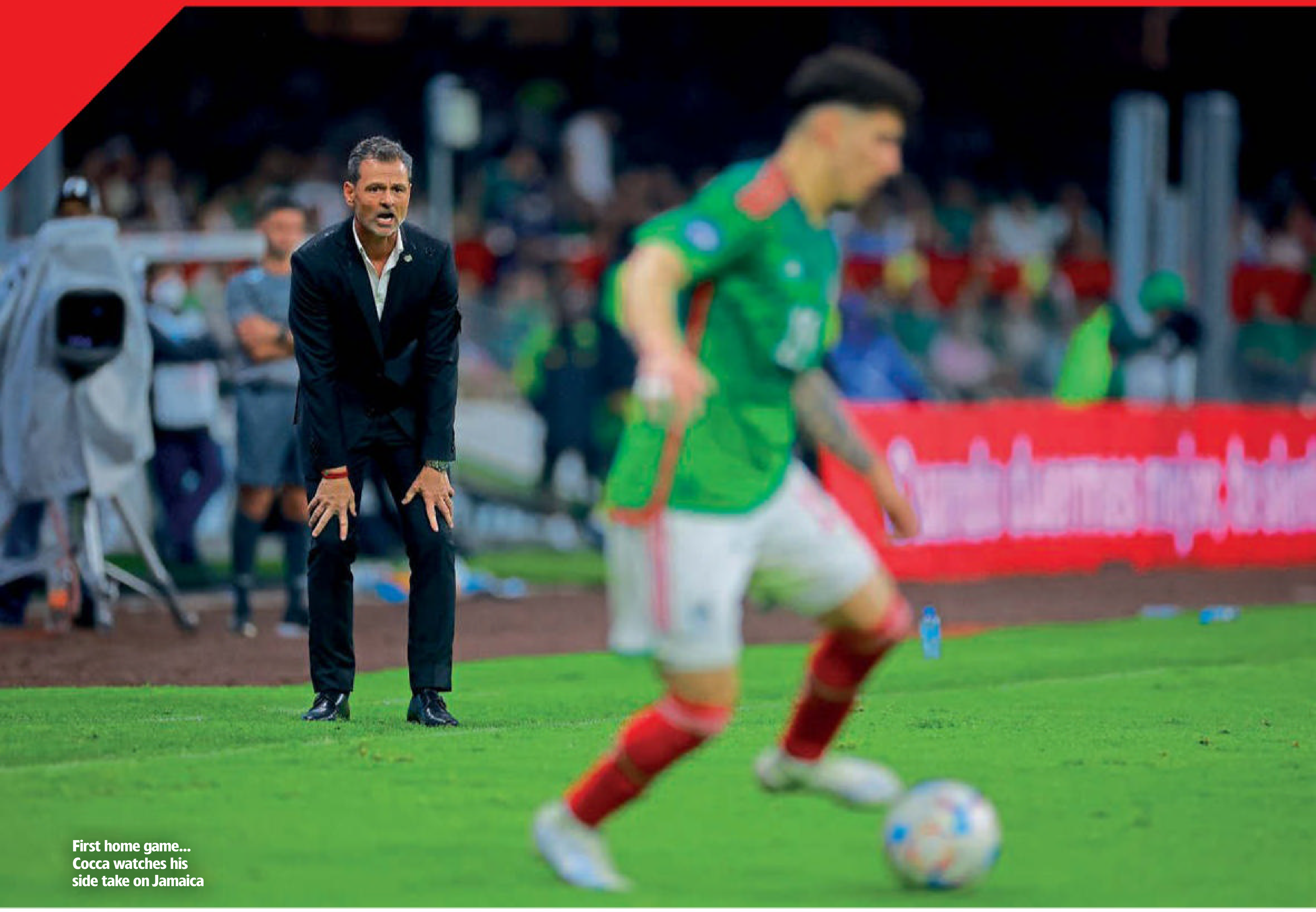
After being appointed in February, Klinsmann got a good look at his new team's defensive frailties in March against Colombia and Uruguay, conceding twice in both friendlies. After the latter, he had to handle an overblown controversy involving Napoli defender Kim Min-jae.

"I only want to focus on my club at the moment, not on the national team," the centre-back said after the 2-1 loss, citing a long and draining campaign. The comment was badly received in Korea, where it was briefly suggested that the Manchester United transfer target was preparing to end his international career. He apologised soon after, and held a meeting with Klinsmann in Naples.

Son Heung-min did find the net against Colombia – his first international goals since before the World Cup – but it has been an underwhelming season for the Tottenham star, and Klinsmann will be concerned that his best players appear to be struggling with fatigue. Upcoming friendlies – against Peru and El Salvador – may provide an opportunity for rest and rotation.

For Klinsmann, the real tests will come at the Asian Cup in Qatar in January. There are still doubts as to whether the former United States boss has the tactical nous to take a team to a first continental title for over 60 years but he has, at least, been saying the right things.

South Korea



First home game... Cocca watches his side take on Jamaica

MEXICO

Diego Cocca

Usually when a new manager takes charge of the Mexico national team, a honeymoon period between him and the fans begins and normally lasts for a couple of years. However, the case of Diego Cocca has been the opposite.

Despite having an acceptable track record in LigaMX, his appointment was received with scepticism. Part of it is that the fans expected a more renowned coach: former boss Miguel Herrera, who led the team to Brazil 2014, was linked with a return, while Pachuca's Uruguayan boss Guillermo Almada was also linked with the job after lifting the 2022 Apertura title.

Another objection to Cocca's appointment was the defensive style with which he won two league titles with Atlas. The Argentine made history by guiding the club to the 2021 Apertura title, their first in 70 years, but did so with a healthy dose of good fortune, drawing all three of the play-off games in normal time.

In addition, there is still a lingering sense of disappointment from Mexico's performance in Qatar 2022 under Cocca's predecessor and fellow Argentine, Tata Martino. The group-stage exit was Mexico's worst performance at a finals since 1978, and Cocca will need to restore faith in himself and his team ahead of a crucial and hectic summer. First up is a Nations League semi-final against arch-rivals United States, followed by either the final or third place play-off against Canada or Panama, then it's straight into the Gold Cup.

With no World Cup qualifiers to come – Mexico qualified automatically as co-hosts – the pressure will be on Cocca to make the most of these early competitive fixtures.

Welcome to Ecuador...former Qatar coach Felix Sanchez is presented to the Ecuadorian media in March

Taking charge...Aleksandar Jankovic oversees a training session with China

IRAN

Amir Ghalenoei

The 59-year-old is back in charge of Iran for the second time and it's fair to say that there wasn't much enthusiasm for the appointment in Tehran.

Just like his first spell in 2006, Ghalenoei comes into the job off the back of a World Cup, this time succeeding Carlos Queiroz. The squad is still recovering from Qatar and all the off-pitch political pressures that came with it but, as an Iranian, he may find that easier than Queiroz. The federation regard Ghalenoei as a safe pair of hands even though he hasn't pulled up many trees in the club scene since his first spell when he led Team Melli to a quarter-final exit at the 2007 Asian Cup.

There is plenty of talent in the squad to help Ghalenoei on his way, but he has plenty to do in order to win over the media and fans.

ECUADOR

Felix Sanchez

When Ecuador opened the World Cup with a comfortable win over host nation Qatar, it seemed likely that Sanchez would soon be leaving his long-term position in Qatar, but few would have imagined that the Spaniard would be heading to Quito.

While the World Cup was a disaster, the former Barcelona youth coach showed over the years that he could bring young players through and build an exciting team that, for a while, swept all before them in Asia and competed overseas.

That bodes well for an Ecuador squad that was one of the youngest at the World Cup and includes exciting talents like Moises Caicedo and Piero Hincapie. If he can learn his lessons from Qatar, Sanchez has a huge opportunity - starting with next summer's Copa America.

CHINA

Aleksandar Jankovic

This may be a good time to take charge of China. The Asian Cup is no longer on home soil, which has lifted the pressure on that tournament, while the expansion of the World Cup offers hope of a first qualification since 2002.

The Serbian has worked his way up through the youth teams to become caretaker and then permanent coach, and has watched more Chinese football than any other foreigner in recent years.

There are many issues off the pitch as the 51-year-old knows well, and he has made his first target to improve fitness and aggression levels. He must also decide whether to keep some of the older players and whether to continue selecting the naturalised stars, an experiment that, so far, has had mixed results.

ICELAND

Age Hareide

Despite a 7-0 victory in his final game in charge, former Iceland coach Arnar Vidarsson only won six matches in two-and-a-half years and failed to qualify for Qatar 2022. With the team's hopes of reaching Euro 2024 already in doubt, the Icelandic FA were forced to act.

While Vidarsson only had one previous senior coaching role to his name, his replacement is from the other end of the experience spectrum. The 69-year-old Hareide has been coaching for almost 40 years, including spells in charge of Norway and Denmark. He led the Danes to the last 16 of Russia 2018 and qualified them for Euro 2020, but was replaced before the tournament took place. In total, he only lost three matches in his four-year spell in charge.

As a player, Hareide won 50 caps for Norway and played for Manchester City and Norwich.

SYRIA

Hector Cuper

The Argentine is back in Asia after his unremarkable 13-month spell in charge of Uzbekistan ended in 2019. Fans in Tashkent were not enthused by what they saw as defensive tactics, but that may suit Syria better. The contract is only until the end of the Asian Cup but, if all goes well, the former Inter boss may stay on. Syria can be tough to play against and with Cuper's organisation skills the Qasioun Eagles have what it takes to do well. That will give them a platform for World Cup qualification, a journey that the well-travelled South American successfully managed with Egypt in 2018, but failed to repeat with DR Congo in his last job.

QATAR

Carlos Queiroz

The 70-year-old has swapped Tehran for Doha where he came so close to taking Iran to a first-ever World Cup knockout match. His organisational skills are seen by Qatar as necessary after their disastrous tournament on home soil when they felt they were too naive. If Queiroz can add some steel and fresh faces to what is a talented team, then they have a chance of defending their Asian title on home soil in January. The combative former Real Madrid coach won't be able to complain about facilities this time. This promises to be a fascinating partnership.

GHANA

Chris Hughton

The question of who leads Ghana has caused headaches ever since Milovan Rajevac was sacked in the wake of their group-stage exit from the delayed 2021 AFCON. Otto Addo was promoted from assistant to replace the Serbian and took the team to Qatar but, with a coaching role at Borussia Dortmund, he was always a temporary solution. Hughton arrived last summer as an adviser, and now takes his first managerial role since he was sacked by Nottingham Forest in 2021. His knowledge of the squad – which was the youngest in Qatar – will be key. He'll be hoping to seal qualification to the 2023 AFCON in June.

SAUDI ARABIA

Saad Al Shehri

Saudi Arabia were shocked and sorry to lose Herve Renard to France's women and have appointed the dependable Al Shehri – who led the Under-23 team to the Asian title last year – as caretaker. The permanent role is likely to go to a high-profile foreigner later this summer; rumours abounding in Riyadh include Jose Mourinho, Zinedine Zidane, Roberto Mancini and Jorge Jesus.

MENTS
Cross-border payments

FRANKLY SUPERB

Thomas Frank is showing that his Brentford side are no one-season wonders

Words: Mark Sanderson

Having secured a third consecutive season in the Premier League, and with it a push for qualification for European competition, Brentford manager Thomas Frank has begun to be associated with other jobs. When Tottenham Hotspur parted company with Antonio Conte, Frank was touted as his possible replacement. This is what so-called smaller clubs have always been up against: do well and you face being asset stripped. Not that Frank's head has been turned by gossip, as he quickly distanced himself from the speculation. Hard work and humility are central to his ethos.

The Bees are no strangers to having their best talent plucked from forces higher up the football food chain. Under Matthew Benham's ownership, players have regularly left without damaging the club's cause. Forwards Ollie Watkins, Said Benrahma and Neal Maupay have all been sold for profits in excess of £20 million, while goalkeeper David Raya could do likewise this summer.

For Frank and his coaching staff, this is all part of the challenge of managing a club that continues to be underestimated, even despite wins over Arsenal, Liverpool, Chelsea and Manchester United in their two seasons in the Premier League. Pragmatic and adaptable, the Dane is the perfect fit for England's overachievers.

The club's 13th place finish in the 2021-22 campaign massively exceeded expectations for many outsiders. Any talk of a one-season wonder was quickly dismissed, with the previous points tally of 46 exceeded by the end of April this term. Not bad for the so-called "bus stop in Hounslow", as their fans ironically describe themselves.

It is a fanbase that is clearly loving life, scarcely able to believe just how high the team is flying. At the centre of their affections is Frank, harnessing the positive energy around the place without letting his own feet get too far off the ground.

Much has been reported on Frank's only-good-people philosophy, whereby he only wants to work with caring and responsible personalities. This is complemented by four further core principles: passion, always wanting to learn, togetherness and hard work; the latter of which was evident in the 2021-22 campaign, with Brentford second in the Premier League rankings when it came to distance covered on the pitch by their players.

Under Frank, Brentford play an aggressive high-pressing style, with Danish defensive midfielder Christian Norgaard directing play with arrowed balls towards talismanic centre-forward and top scorer Ivan Toney, who – at the time of writing – was second only to centre-back team-mate Ben Mee in aerial challenges won in the division this season. Toney's flick-ons are often pounced upon by Bryan Mbeumo, as Brentford look to quickly advance towards their opponent's goal. Toney is, of course, the Bees' biggest attacking threat, yet it is testament to Frank's system that they have thrived in his absence, too. When he was injured for the home clash against Liverpool, for instance, Yoane Wissa seamlessly slotted in and scored in a 3-1 victory.

Rather tellingly, it wasn't until late April's comeback win over Nottingham Forest that they won a game where they'd had more possession than their opponents. Of course, Brentford are not the first Premier League team to favour a direct approach, but in the Championship they were a different prospect. In their last four seasons in the second tier, they were consistently among the league's top three for average possession and passing accuracy, once again highlighting Frank's pragmatic adaptability.

In terms of shape, Brentford have often alternated between a 3-5-2 and 4-3-3 formation, while always retaining the intent to press high up the pitch. They run hard and they run quickly, none more so than left-back Rico Henry, whose pace in beating Mohamad Salah in a foot race stunned Liverpool players.

Denmark Under-19s head coach... Frank watches his team take on England in 2013

Henry's story is indicative of several of Brentford's squad: deemed too small and timid by Aston Villa as a youngster, he made his name at Walsall before Brentford paid an initial £1.5 million for him in 2016. Under Frank's tutelage he's now worth considerably more.

Like many of his players, Frank's background was unspectacular and required plenty of graft. One of only four current Premier League managers who didn't play professionally (Roy Hodgson, Ruben Selles and Steve Cooper are the others), he joined Brentford in 2016 as Dean Smith's assistant. It was a job that he almost turned down; having spent the previous five years as a head coach, he questioned whether becoming a number two was a step back in his career. But, emboldened by the club's vision of developing players and getting the chance to fulfil an ambition of working abroad, he accepted.

Smith's departure for Aston Villa in 2018 opened up a vacancy in the head coach role, and the Dane's familiarity with the club's way of working made him the obvious candidate. It was an appointment that strengthened the ties between West London and Denmark; Benham is also the owner of Danish side Midtjylland, and the Bees have frequently shopped in the Superliga.

Frank made an ominous start, losing eight of his first ten games to leave the Bees teetering above the Championship relegation zone and inviting speculation over the manager's future. But the following season he took the club to within a whisker of the Premier League, losing in the play-off final to West London rivals Fulham – despite finishing ahead of them and beating them twice in the league.

That 2-1 extra-time defeat at Wembley fed a superstitious narrative that, after nine consecutive failures, Brentford were simply cursed to never win in the play-offs.

Yet a year later, after another third-place finish, they got the job done at the tenth attempt courtesy of a 2-0 win over Swansea City.

In achieving promotion to the top flight, the Bees became the 50th club to play in the Premier League. While the team and its manager may have been unfamiliar to the rest of the division, Frank was ready for the challenge, having diligently honed his craft as a coach for over a quarter of a century. Self-aware enough to know that he would never make it as a professional player, he put his efforts into coaching, starting with the Under-8 sides of his hometown club Frederiksvaerk, who he remains in regular touch with.

By the late 1990s, Frank had taken on several roles in Denmark, most notably with former champions Lyngby, who were starting from scratch in the lower divisions after going bankrupt in 2001. There he worked with current Denmark head coach Kasper Hjulmand and Aston Villa sporting director Johan Lange.

There was little money and many hours to work, yet these men all shared a passion to rebuild the club, working 60 hours a week, getting up at six to prepare training sessions, coaching the first and youth teams, as well as building a video library and being early adopters to statistics and data. By 2007, Lyngby were back in the Danish top flight.

Hjulmand believes that spell was the making of all of them. By 2008, Frank had caught the eye of the Danish Football Association, landing a role as head coach of the national Under-17 side, who he led to the 2011 European Championship. Nurturing a squad that included Tottenham's Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg and RB Leipzig's Yussuf Poulsen, as well as the Bees' current vice-captain Norgaard, they beat an England team featuring Raheem Sterling and Jordan Pickford on their way to a semi-final defeat to Germany.

> It is a fanbase that is clearly loving life, scarcely able to believe just how high the team is flying. At the centre of their affections is Frank

Curse ended... Brentford players throw Frank in the air after their play-off victory at Wembley

Well drilled and thoroughly prepared, his young Danish side were always equipped with a plan A, B and C and a good understanding of how they should play through the four phases of play. Hard work was non-negotiable for both Frank's players and himself.

In 2013 he landed his first head coach role in football, at Danish top-flight side Brondby. This was a different environment for him, bringing with it new challenges – the club and its fans hungered for a return of the glory years of the late 1980s and early '90s when they won five league titles between 1985 and 1991.

CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE

MORTEN OLSEN

Frank credits Olsen as one of his biggest coaching inspirations. Captain of Denmark at the 1986 World Cup, Olsen became national team manager in 2000 but by 2004 was unhappy with the quality of Danish players. Determined to change this he began brainstorming with upcoming coaches, including Frank. This dialogue became known as the "red thread", the core principals of which were structured build-up, retention of possession and counter-pressing when possession was lost.

KASPER HJULMAND

The two worked closely as Lyngby coaches, often swapping ideas in the club's tiny office. Frank believes that Hjulmand's Nordsjaelland side were among the first teams to press so high up the pitch, and that the current Denmark coach's tactical abilities are on a par with Pep Guardiola.

DEAN SMITH

Frank credits Smith with helping him settle in a new country, and the two remain good colleagues. "What I liked was he had loads of enthusiasm and was exuberant around the training ground – he loves the game," said Smith. "He has personality and character, but on top of that his tactical knowledge and coaching ability is fantastic. It is no surprise to me that he has done as well as he has."

MARCELO BIELSA

Frank came up against Bielsa several times when the Argentine was at Leeds, and says that part of his and Brentford's approach is a version of Bielsa's. It was his Chile side of 2008 that first caught Frank's eye, and he tried to incorporate that with the Danish youth team, only to discover just how much running his team had to do to make that work.

Frank had several of his Danish youth squad at the club and within a year Daniel Agger from Liverpool too, Denmark's captain at the time. Most Brondby players would testify how they liked Frank as a person. His gregarious nature, work ethic and knowledge of the game were not in question. He maintained his openness, prepared to discuss solutions with players, which was respected. The only doubt was whether he could lay down the law and let his players know who was boss when necessary.

With time, he added that required toughness to his arsenal, demanding high standards from his players. For example, in the small-sided games that ended training, any team that lost by four or more would be forced to stay behind for more work.

Frank developed, but could not take the team as far as was hoped. The league title remained elusive, and a failure to qualify for the group stage of the Europa League invited further criticism.

He left the club amid bizarre circumstances after it was found that the club chairman had been criticising the coach under a pseudonym on a fan forum. With relations between the two strained, Frank resigned in March 2016. Later that year, he joined Brentford.

He does reflect on the relentlessness of the profession. When his old colleague Dean Smith took on the Norwich City job just eight days after being sacked by Aston Villa, Frank jokingly asking his old colleague what on Earth he was doing. "The day I get sacked, I'll be travelling," he said. Fortunately for him and Brentford, that day appears to be a long way off.

Feel-good factor ...Frank celebrates another victory with the Brentford fans

MORTEN RUTKJAER

"Everyone wants football to grow"

Ahead of their participation at the Island Games, Greenland's head coach discusses the team's pursuit of more football

Where does your drive to help raise Greenland's football profile come from?
It started in 2020. At that time, I was a coach in Denmark. The advisory boards and the national director from Greenland called me and asked if I wanted to be the national team manager. And in four minutes, we made a deal. I had been to Greenland before. Each time I was there, I thought there were many possibilities to boost football in Greenland. So, when he told me Greenland wanted to develop a national team and become part of the world football family, I said yes. For me, it's a big thing to be the national coach of Greenland because the people are so fantastic, and everyone wants to improve Greenlandic football.

What is it like trying to gain credibility as a competitive international team?
These last two years, I have tried to find some opponents who will meet Greenland. I've talked with many countries who say they want to help. But FIFA and CONCACAF say it's not so good because Greenland is not a member. Hopefully, we will gain a membership somewhere. In 2021, we met FC Nordsjaelland in the Right to Dream project and we lost 3-1. It was the biggest game ever for Greenlandic football to meet a Danish Superliga team. Last year we met Kosovo's Under-21 team with some national players playing, and we only lost 1-0. So, I try to get the national team out against high-quality opponents, so we can be ready as soon as we get a partnership somewhere. I try, but it's tough.

How do you feel about not being recognised as an independent football country away from Denmark?
I don't have an opinion on that. But it confirms that it is vital that Denmark and the football association support the application so that FIFA can see that we mean it and can easily stand on our own two feet.

How would CONCACAF membership change football in Greenland?
It will make a difference. Many more young people will start playing football and, when membership is a reality, the players in Greenland will have a goal to train and play towards, not only friendly matches. They can build some form. The young ones need to look up to something. Having an objective is so vital for Greenland and the Greenlandic players. It's priceless. And there is a real chance it will happen, especially for our development and if football is to take a new step in a positive direction.

What can you achieve at the upcoming XIX Island Games in Guernsey?
We can get a lot out of the Island Games. Firstly, there are a lot of matches, so the players get a lot of international experience. Then, we're looking forward to the Bermuda match, where we'll have the opportunity to test ourselves against a CONCACAF member nation. It will be very cool. Regarding the results, we'll take one game at a time. And then we'll see.

Just how significant is the fixture against Bermuda?
It's a massive game because we can see where we are against them. We need to compare ourselves to other teams. I don't know where our level is now. But we want to have good experiences and matches with good opponents. That's the first thing. I hope we'll have a membership with CONCACAF next year or the year after. It's exciting. We're moving quickly at the moment.

What can you say about your squad, such as their personalities and style of play?
I'm very proud to lead a group of amazing people. We each have our personalities and invite to the community and the team. Everyone in the squad thinks about others before themselves, which is one of the team's core values. They have a winning mentality and are also skilled footballers. We all play with pride for Greenland. We show that on the field.

How do training facilities and conditions affect their professional progress?
Now we have maybe 24 artificial football fields everywhere in Greenland. So, they can play for seven or eight months outside. But it's tricky in the winter because of the weather. And they don't have the machines to clean the football fields when there is a lot of snow; they go inside and play futsal instead for four or five months a year, so it's difficult for me to have football players who play all year. When I have a gathering with the national team, I see they play at a high technical level but miss many tactical things for 11-a-side games. I hope that, in two or three years, they will build a football field with a roof so they can play all year.

Do you see football as a means to express Greenlandic national identity?
I always say that we try to win every time we play. But that's not the most important thing, which is to play for your country. So, every time you see the national team play and when you work with the players, they really want to do their best. When you do your best, you can be proud. We also try to take up the fight against the biggest teams in the world and spring a surprise against them. We're trying to become better and better.

What bearing does the game have on Greenlandic people's lives generally?
Every person I meet in Greenland talks about football. Older and younger people are playing football everywhere they can. I can feel it when we have a gathering with the national team. Many people come to see the team play. There is also great interest in our Greenlandic championships when the whole country gathers. After one final ended, there were fireworks, and everyone cried with happiness – or because their team didn't win. Everyone wants football to grow, and everyone has a connection with football. Whenever I travel around Greenland, I meet older people who want to discuss football with me. And then there are younger ones, who play everywhere – on ice or fields, inside or outside.

Interview by Henry Flynn

KAK

DESIREE ELLIS

"There's still a gap between the top nations but it's slowly closing"

The head coach of the South Africa women's team assesses her country's chances ahead of the upcoming World Cup in Australia and New Zealand

What are Africa's chances of causing a shock at the Women's World Cup in the same way that Morocco shook up Qatar?
I think Morocco have shown it is possible. We're going to a second World Cup, you have Nigeria who have been ever-present and we have Morocco who have done fantastically with a women's programme. Zambia always surprise; you look at what they did at the Olympics, even though they didn't get through to the next round, but they surprised a few.

Football is now not about the rankings anymore. It's about what happens on the field. Our team, for example, is four years older, more mature, we have a couple of players playing at good clubs in Europe, and we are coming off the WAFCON [Women's Africa Cup of Nations] victory.

There's a little bit more pressure now after doing well at WAFCON. I think it's possible to get out the group stage. We can't be naive, though; the groups are tough. But I think Morocco showed, when they were not given a chance in their group in Qatar, that it's possible. They not only went through, but they almost won the World Cup. You've got to make sure that you are in peak physical condition and that everybody executes the plans. If you can get a positive result in your first game, then you plan further.

I don't think we must undermine ourselves as a continent, because we have tremendous talent. We must just make sure that everything leading up to that works out properly. I think there could be a few surprises, not just with the teams from Africa but elsewhere too. Already there were many upsets in the qualifiers and particularly the play-offs.

There has always been a gap between the established powers of women's football and the rest. How big is that gap now? Has it closed?
Look, I think there is still a gap. When you look at the Europeans, for example, they play on a much more regular basis. You can just jump on a bus and go to the Netherlands or go to Belgium or go to Germany and play, but it's not that easy for us. Most of the teams we play, or Nigeria play, are ranked much lower and don't really – with all due respect – give us the resistance or preparation that we're looking for. A lot of the countries in Europe, the Americas as well, are fully-fledged professionals and that makes a huge difference.

I think that countries have caught up, but you still have that gap because of the lack of regular top opposition. You look at the men's World Cup, a couple of results were very surprising, but it's the work that people put in. And I think that's going to happen with the men's and women's World Cups going forward. There's still a gap between the top nations but it's slowly closing.

Can you describe how drastic the growth of women's football in Africa has been, as the cultural and negative perceptions about a woman playing sport have been broken down? Would it be fair to describe it as revolutionary?
I think so, yes. When you look back, we had our first game as a women's national team when I was captain and we were training with one shirt each that we had to wash overnight to use again the next day. And if you didn't come back for the next game, somebody else would have that shirt. I played over a period of almost ten years and only got 32 caps; now they play almost half of those matches in a single year. Never in my wildest imagination would I have ever thought that we would play the number one country in the world [United States] twice. We've played Sweden, Netherlands, France... back then, you could not have imagined all the competitions we now have, with the CAF Champions League, the different zonal tournaments, different age-group tournaments. It's really changed.

But there's still a lot to do?
Most definitely. I think the biggest challenge is schools football in the country. That foundation phase is so key for us in women's football, because when you visit any local football association or any region, you have boys playing from as young as seven or eight years old, but it doesn't really happen in the woman's side.

I think the ultimate really would be to have a professional league. Everybody's yearning for that, with the best playing against the best every week. And then you really see the competitiveness and how things change. Nowadays, there are a couple of games that are really good but many others that don't live up to the standard.

What was your reaction to the draw? You start against Sweden, then Argentina and Italy in Group G...
I'd say we are in a reasonable group. I'm not underestimating the teams, but we could have had the US or England, or Germany like we had in France four years ago.

They are top-ten countries. Sweden are now ranked number three and not for nothing; they did so well at the Euros and got silver at the last Olympics. Italy are a rising force, and Argentina too – they'll want to try to emulate the men's team!

We've got to look at what we've learned from four years ago and how our players have matured, and hopefully that can carry us through. It's not going to be easy. We've got to make sure we have planned and prepared

properly. Then you have a chance. I think everybody goes there with ambition; everybody goes there to put your best foot forward. If our players really step up, which we believe they can, then they can spring a few surprises. But it depends on that first game [against Sweden], which is the most important game.

South Africa is bidding to host the next Women's World Cup in 2027. What is the potential impact of that?
Winning the Cup of Nations has already proven a major inspiration to young girls around the country; there are so many more really playing now. More young girls are playing everywhere in the world and they're getting younger and younger. A World Cup in Africa would just break down even more barriers and inhibitions and be a brilliant boost to get everyone playing. ”

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Homecoming queen

Starring at a World Cup on home soil is the perfect opportunity for Sam Kerr to crown herself the queen of the women's game

If anyone doubted Sam Kerr's exalted status in Australia, confirmation came at the coronation of the new British monarch, King Charles III. The Matildas' captain was chosen to be her nation's flag bearer, leading a delegation that included prime minister Anthony Albanese into Westminster Abbey.

It was the latest honour for a woman who will be bearing another significant load at the World Cup: the co-hosts' hopes of success.

Kerr is the leading goalscorer of her generation and the reason many regard Australia as dark horses at the finals. She has won the Golden Boot in three continents: Australia's W-League (twice), America's NWSL (thrice) and England's WSL (twice), winning Player of the Year awards in all three countries. The 29-year-old has made the top seven in all four editions of the Ballon d'Or Feminin, coming third in both 2021 and 2022, and been shortlisted for the last six FIFA Best Women's Player awards, finishing second in 2021.

It is highly impressive going for a girl who grew up in a house fixated on Australian rules football, which both her Anglo-Indian father, brother and maternal grandfather played professionally. She only got into soccer at the age of 12 after no longer being allowed to play Aussie rules with boys.

> Kerr is the leading goalscorer of her generation and the reason many regard Australia as dark horses at the finals. She has won the Golden Boot in three continents

A hugely popular sport in Australia, whose nearest cousin is Irish Gaelic football, Australian rules is physically and athletically demanding with great emphasis on mobility. While the transition to soccer was difficult initially, it proved a good grounding for the young Kerr.

Three years later she made her debut for Australia and she has rarely looked back. She scored her first international goal at 16 and now has more than 60, making her Australia's leading scorer of either gender.

Having made her mark Down Under with hometown club Perth Glory, and Sydney FC, Kerr began spending the southern hemisphere winters playing NWSL – where she featured for Western New York Flash, Sky Blue and Chicago Red Stars.

After seven years of playing both leagues she moved to Europe. Chelsea fought off Lyon, Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain to sign her and she made her debut in January 2020.

Kerr initially struggled to settle, a process inevitably made much harder when the league shut down in March due to COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions confined her to London – a city she barely knew. Even after the UK opened up she was unable to go home and missed her family, her dog, Australian coffee and sunshine.

But Blues boss Emma Hayes proved an empathetic coach, and once Kerr found her feet she also rediscovered her scoring touch. In the last three seasons she has hit almost a goal-a-game, helping Chelsea pile up the silverware.

She has also developed as a player, which was one of the aims in coming to Chelsea. Kerr was already a good finisher, strong in the air, and excelled at running off a defender's shoulder. But the A-League and NWSL are relatively evenly-matched leagues with transitional patterns of play. The European game is more tactical, and at WSL serial title-winners Chelsea she consistently comes up against packed defences. Suddenly the space Kerr liked to run into wasn't there.

The need to adapt has made her a better player, more skilled at acting as a focal point, combining with team-mates, and at operating in tight areas. She has also underlined her big-game mentality. Chelsea have played seven domestic cup finals with Kerr: she has scored five goals in four League Cup finals and five goals in three FA Cup finals.

Fiercely competitive, she told critics via an on-pitch TV interview to "suck on that one" after Australia beat Brazil to quell increasingly vocal doubts at the 2019 World Cup, but has generally been a more decorous trailblazer for women's sport in Australia.

She is also out and proud of her same-sex relationship with Kristie Mewis, the United States international midfielder who plays for New Jersey-based Gotham FC. Both feel their example can make the lives of young gay fans easier.

Christened the "millionaire Matilda" after a Nike endorsement took her annual earnings past AUS$1 million four years ago, she is by some distance Australia's highest-earning female team sports athlete with only a handful of tennis and golf players in her league.

It's not about the money though. The night Australia's bid to co-host the Women's World Cup succeeded, the Sydney Opera House was lit up by an image of her backflip goal celebration. A repeat come August 20, with the image being Kerr holding the World Cup aloft, would be priceless.

Glenn Moore

Matildas legend…Kerr has scored 63 goals in 120 games for Australia

Comeback kid

Alex Morgan has returned to the United States Women's national team set-up just in time for her fourth World Cup

Since winning the 2019 World Cup, Alex Morgan has had two long absences from the US national team. The first was her choice: she had a baby girl, Charlie, in May 2020. Coupled with an ankle injury, that kept her out of international action for 508 days.

The second absence was coach Vlatko Andonovski's decision. In the wake of the team's disappointing 2021 Olympics (the US won bronze – an achievement in the eyes of most, but not the four-time winners), he omitted several veterans to look at emerging talent. "There's a reason we're not calling Mia Hamm and Julie Foudy in camp," he observed, citing two past greats, long retired.

That absence lasted 242 days and Morgan wasn't sure it would ever end: the team played seven matches without her, including the victorious 2022 She Believes Cup campaign.

Morgan was a month shy of her 33rd birthday when Andonovski told her she was back in the squad, and she later admitted when she took the call that she "had no idea" what the news was going to be.

Morgan will be 34 when the World Cup, her fourth, kicks off. No longer the rookie who was nicknamed "Baby Horse" for her leggy, coltish rawness, she's as important to the team as ever. In a squad that has undergone considerable change, her experience of big championships is valuable in itself. But she's in the squad on playing merit. Andonovski had insisted that the veterans would only return if they performed; Morgan has delivered.

> Morgan's revival is good for the World Cup. She's long been one the most recognisable soccer players in the United States, male or female, with an extraordinary personal brand

Last year, leading the San Diego Wave attack, she won the NWSL's Golden Boot award with 15 goals in the regular season, as they became the first expansion team to make the play-offs.

This season she began with four goals in five games. Since coming back into the national team she's also been scoring for them, against both good sides (Canada and Brazil) and cannon fodder (New Zealand, Nigeria and Haiti).

Morgan's revival is good for the World Cup. She's long been one of the most recognisable soccer players in the United States, male or female, with an extraordinary personal brand.

Morgan has over ten million followers on Instagram and almost four million on Twitter. Sophia Smith, last season's NWSL MVP, has 130,000 and 20,000 respectively. Such fame brings rewards. There are endorsement deals with blue-chip companies such as Coca-Cola, Nike, Bank of America and Panasonic.

California-born and educated at Berkeley – where she met her husband, MLS veteran Servando Carrasco – Morgan was tipped for stardom well before she scored the winner in the 2008 U20 World Cup final. She won the first of more than 200 full caps 14 months later and soon scored the first of more than 120 international goals.

She has subsequently won the World Cup twice and the Olympics once, the UEFA Champions League and French title during a six-month spell with Lyon, plus two domestic US titles and a stack of individual honours.

Throughout Morgan has pushed herself to improve. The move to Lyon was undoubtedly financially beneficial, but Morgan was as much motivated by the desire to expand her horizons and develop her game at the sport's strongest squad.

She recollected: "I was there on my own. I ate, breathed and slept soccer and I think my evolution as a player grew as I was able to focus on a different style of play. I was used in different ways, as a No.9 and a winger. And I was playing with some of the best players in the world – the training environment was the best it could be."

Her other overseas role was very different, joining a Tottenham team that was struggling in England's WSL. She had Charlie with her, but not Carrasco who was playing in Florida. There to get match-fit ahead of the Olympics, Morgan's impact on the pitch was limited, but she left an important legacy.

Finding training facilities were not up to scratch she used her influence to push Tottenham to allow the women to share the men's training complex, which continues to be the case.

In the US she has played across the country. From Western New York Flash in the northeast, Seattle Sounders and Portland Thorns in the northwest, Orlando Pride in the southeast, and now San Diego in the southwest.

For much of this time she and Carrasco, who married in 2014, have been based thousands of miles apart. With the latter's retirement they are now a "normal" family, based in southern California where both grew up.

This stability, and the positive environment that English coach Casey Stoney has developed at Wave, seem good for her. The USWNT will hope to reap the benefits this summer.

Glenn Moore

Stars and Stripes legend...Morgan has scored 121 goals in 206 games for the USWNT

Unstoppable force

Even at the age of 40, Canada's talismanic captain and all-time record scorer remains as determined as ever to deliver success

For more than a decade Christine Sinclair was Canada's best footballer; for several years she was probably the best in the world. At the 2015 Women's World Cup in her home nation, her face stared out of magazines and newspapers, video games, postage stamps and television screens, and down from giant billboards. In her stellar career she has won over 300 caps for her country and scored 190 international goals, a tally which put her top of the all-time scoring charts – including both male and female internationals.

She'll be 40 when the 2023 World Cup starts. Inevitably she's no longer the best in the world, or even in Canada, but she remains hugely influential and there was never any doubt over coach Bev Priestman taking her captain to Australia.

On the pitch she started Canada's toughest warm-up matches, away to the US and France, and was part of the Portland Thorns team that won the NWSL title in November. Off it she is leading the fight for equality. So shy as a schoolgirl she walked the corridors with her head down, she took to celebrity uneasily, doing it because she recognised that she had to in order to promote the sport and, later, research into multiple sclerosis which her mother suffered from prior to her death last year.

> At the 2011 World Cup she had her nose smashed by a Germany defender's elbow early in the first match. The medics wanted to substitute her. Sinclair refused, screaming: "I want to play"

Sinclair remains a private person with her personal relationship status closely guarded, impressively so given her fame in Canada. But earlier this year she sat in the Canadian parliament excoriating the men who ran Canada Soccer for their neglect of their women's team. During it, she revealed Nick Bontis, who had been forced to resign as president of Canada Soccer, had said in a meeting: "What was it Christine was bitching about?"

Sinclair had been "bitching about" the federation's lack of respect for their Olympic gold medal-winning women's team. The struggle for recognition, fairness and equality is one she knows is more likely to be won if she fronts it. She and former national team-mate Diana Matheson have even used their stature and contacts to create the country's first professional women's league, set to be launched in 2025.

Sinclair has been fighting since she started in a mixed-gender Under-7s team at the age of four. At the 2011 World Cup she had her nose smashed by a Germany defender's elbow early in the first match. The medics wanted to substitute her. Sinclair refused, screaming: "I want to play". She went back on, and blew a kiss to the bench when she scored. Afterwards her nose was re-set and she played the rest of the campaign wearing a padded mask, though only at the medics' insistence.

A year later, after some American chicanery led to a gut-wrenching extra-time semi-final defeat at the London Olympics – despite a Sinclair hat-trick – coach John Herdman conferred outside the dressing room with the team psychologist wondering how he could lift his team for the bronze medal match. He need not have worried. Inside Sinclair told her sobbing team-mates, several of whom felt they had let her down: "I've never been more proud to be on a field with a team. Heads up, we've a medal to win, and I'm not leaving here without one." Two days later Canada won bronze.

Nine years on she wasn't on the pitch when Canada won gold, on penalties, against Sweden in Tokyo – Priestman had subbed her off after 86 minutes. There were no histrionics. As she later explained: "When my number comes up and I'm taken off, I'm always disappointed. But I'll never show it. I respect my team-mates, Bev and her staff too much to do that. I have no right to sulk. It's all about making the team succeed."

That humility makes it a lot easier for Priestman to keep her involved, as does her evolution from a traditional centre-forward to a creative attacking midfielder. Now she provides chances for the younger legs of Jordyn Huitema, Nichelle Prince and Adriana Leon, though none are remotely as prolific as she was in her prime.

Sinclair has spent her 22-year senior career in North America, starting out in her native Vancouver and spending the last decade in Portland. As a result of that, combined with Canada's underwhelming World Cup record, she is less well known in Europe than she should be.

Maybe this World Cup, her sixth, will change that. She has scored at the previous five and even if the goals have dried up, and opposing coaches no longer focus their entire game plan on stopping her, they will still be wary. "The World Cup", she says, "that's kind of the missing piece."

Glenn Moore

Canada legend...
Sinclair has hit 190
goals in 323 games
for her country

Glenn Moore

Manchester United join WSL giants

Despite FA Cup final defeat, the Red Devils have turned the WSL's big three into a big four

Joining the giants... Manchester United supporters watch their team in the FA Cup final at Wembley

When Manchester United women strode out onto the Wembley turf in May to be introduced to Prince William ahead of the Women's FA Cup final, it was a fortnight short of five years since the club came into being. Reaching the final was a landmark moment for the club, as was the sell-out crowd for the sport.

A domestic club-record 77,390 watched Chelsea win 1-0, with Australia sharpshooter Sam Kerr scoring the only goal in the 68th minute. But until the arrival of the winning goal's creator – Pernille Harder off the bench ten minutes prior – United had been the better side. While Alessia Russo led United's line well, if it had been Kerr wearing red then those would have been the colours of the cup's ribbons in the celebratory aftermath.

> "We are growing and we are investing. This is the club that you want to come to if you're a top talent. This is a club that's going places"
>
> Manchester United boss Marc Skinner

United took too long to form a serious women's team and are still waiting for their first win against Chelsea, but in their brief existence they have defeated Arsenal and Manchester City and turned the "big three" into a four.

Avram Glazer was in attendance at Wembley, which may prove significant as manager Marc Skinner builds a team for the club's first foray into the Champions League. The co-owner could not have failed to be impressed by the commercial possibilities of the packed United end.

"We are growing and we are investing," said Skinner after the final. "This is the club that you want to come to if you're a top talent. This is a club that's going places."

It is – although they are playing catch-up due to United's belated arrival on the women's football bandwagon.

After the FA's ban was lifted in 1971 there had been affiliations of varying formality with United-related outfits, but they made little national impact and all connections were ended after the Glazers took over in 2005. Women's football was deemed not part of the "core business". The girls' academy survived, but only because its existence was a condition of receiving central funding for the boys equivalent.

With fierce regional rivals Liverpool, then City, investing in their adult women's teams, pressure grew on United to follow suit. They resisted until 2018, by which time it had become increasingly clear that the sport had earnings potential.

City had been promoted into the Women's Super League in 2014 via a licensing round. A second round in 2018 provided United the opportunity to do the same, joining the newly-rebranded second-tier Women's Championship.

This was a semi-professional league, but United launched as a full-time outfit. Having finally taken the plunge they were all-in, up to a point – whereas City had their own ground at the Etihad complex, United rent at Leigh Sports Village. Owned by the local authority and the home of Leigh Leopards rugby league team, it is 14 miles west of Manchester and ill-served from there by public transport.

Dejected...Alessia Russo reacts after United's narrow defeat to Chelsea

Casey Stoney quit her role as part of then-England manager Phil Neville's coaching staff to become United's first head coach and set about building a formidable squad. While England internationals Siobhan Chamberlain, Alex Greenwood and Amy Turner were lured from Liverpool, the emphasis was on young players including Ella Toone, Katie Zelem and Lauren James, all of whom would go on to play for England. Toone and Zelem were among seven players who had been at United's academy, but had to leave to play senior football.

United romped the Championship, taking 55 points out of a possible 60 – starting with a 12-0 win in their first-ever league game. In the top flight, they subsequently finished fourth three times in a row, coping relatively seamlessly with Skinner replacing Stoney when she left to coach San Diego Wave, but without cracking the stranglehold of the top three.

That has changed this year. They still lost home and away to Chelsea but beat Arsenal twice and went into the cup final with a top-three place virtually assured. Indeed, by the time you're reading this, they may even have won the league title after pushing Chelsea all the way and taking it down to the final day.

Toone and Zelem are still regulars, as are Leah Galton and Millie Turner of the initial squad. They are now

supplemented by the likes of England team-mates Russo, Mary Earps, Nikita Parris and new cap Maya Le Tissier. With Hannah Blundell also a mainstay the only players in the regular starting XI not from England are Hayley Ladd of Wales and Spain's Ona Batlle. That's a stark contrast to Chelsea, Arsenal and, recently, Manchester City, who all field multi-national teams.

Batlle and Russo are out of contract this summer. For United to continue to progress they need to keep such players. One issue was off the field, where the club has at time struggled to match its rivals. Stoney was known to be frustrated at the quality of training facilities when she left and there were problems with accommodation and changing facilities.

Now a new building for the women's team is going up at the men's club's Carrington base and a dedicated head of women's football is in place, poached from Brighton, one of the WSL's most forward-thinking clubs.

The fanbase is growing too. United were very well-supported at Wembley, drew 30,000-plus to Old Trafford in December, and average around 6,000 at Leigh. Being in the Champions League will, says Skinner, accelerate everything. "It's huge for us," he said.

Skinner added: "This club has to be in the pool to recruit the very best. It's really important that we are in finals, it's really important that we can turn those into wins, and that we challenge at the very top of the table. If we do that I think the very best players in the world will want to come to Manchester United."

Round-up

Rematch... England and Scotland last clashed at the 2019 World Cup

▶ BATTLE OF BRITAIN IN FIRST-EVER NATIONS LEAGUE

England and Scotland were drawn together in the inaugural UEFA Women's Nations League, with another cross-border rivalry in Belgium and the Netherlands making up Group A1. There is a significant prize at stake: the finalists from the 16-team League A will represent Europe at the 2024 Olympics (third place will qualify if Olympic hosts France reach the final).

In League B Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland were also drawn together. Of UEFA's 55 nations only Gibraltar, Liechtenstein and San Marino did not enter, while Russia are still banned due to the invasion of Ukraine.

Fixtures start in September with the finals (and promotion/relegation play-offs) to take place in February 2024.

Italian champions... Roma

▶ COMPETITION FOR NWSL LOOMS

A new league is to apply to US Soccer to be ratified as a Division 1 competition and rival the NWSL. The USL Super League plans to start in autumn 2024 with 10-12 teams. With NWSL due to have 14 teams by 2024 that would double the current number of professional women's teams in the US.

USL runs three men's leagues below MLS and the amateur 65-team women's grassroots W League.

▶ ROMA WIN *SCUDETTO*

Roma ended Juventus' five-year stranglehold on the Italian title, lifting the women's Serie A trophy with three matches to spare. A 3-2 victory at Juve, their ninth win in succession, set up the success that was clinched a week later with victory over Fiorentina. The *Giallorosse*, who also reached the last eight of the Champions League in a landmark season, entered the league via a takeover by the men's club of the independent Res Roma five years ago.

Key players in a squad drawn from nine nations include Italy internationals Elisa Bartoli, Elena Linari and Valentina Giacinti, Brazil's Andressa, Norway's Emilie Haavi and Japan's Moeka Minami.

Although only 2,700 watched the title-winning match, there were 39,454 in attendance for their Champions League quarter-final tie against Barcelona.

▶ LYON AND WOLFSBURG WIN DOMESTIC CUPS

Ada Hegerberg scored both goals as Lyon won the Coupe de France for the ninth time in 11 years, beating Paris Saint-Germain 2-1. Ramona Bachmann pulled a goal back for PSG from the penalty spot, but though Lyon's Damaris Egurrola was sent off late on the holders could not force an equaliser.

In Germany, Wolfsburg won a ninth cup in succession, winning 4-1 against Freiburg, who were playing only their second final having lost to the Lady Wolves previously in 2019.

▶ BARCA'S TITLE AGAIN

Barcelona clinched their fourth successive Spanish title, and eighth in 12 years, with four matches to spare. At that stage they had won all 26 matches scoring 108 goals and conceding just five. The trophy was lifted by Alexia Putellas, who returned late in the title-sealing defeat of Huelva after 299 days out with an ACL injury.

Champions' parade... Barcelona players on an open-top bus tour of the city

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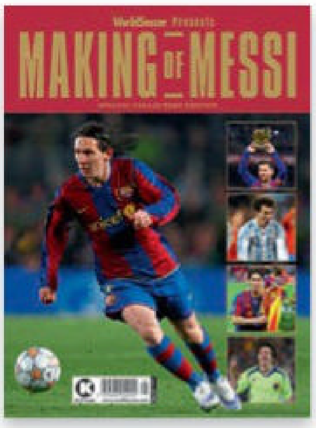
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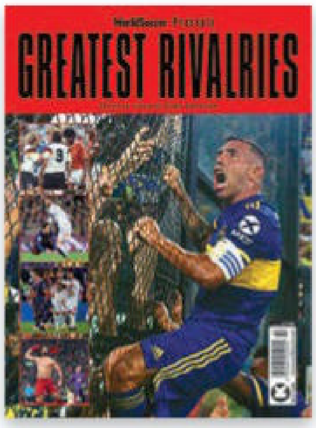
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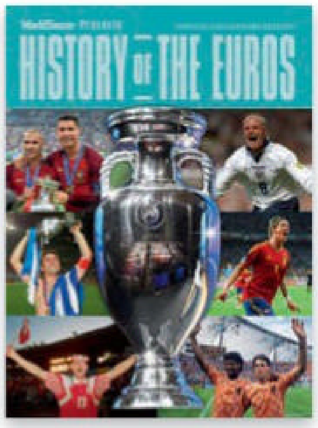
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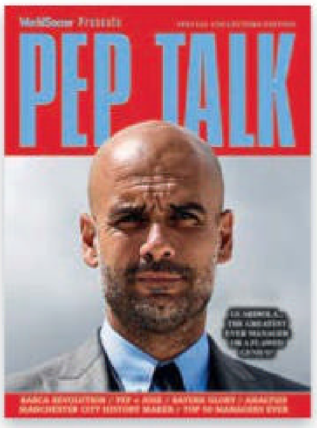

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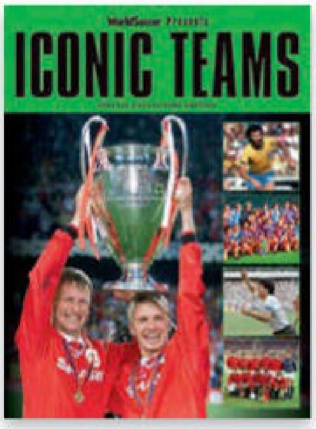
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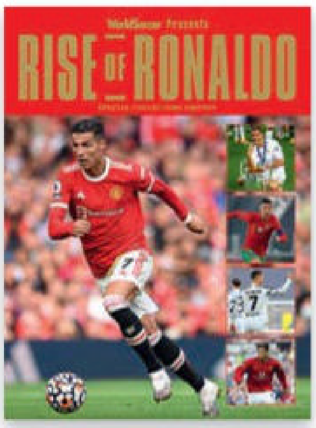
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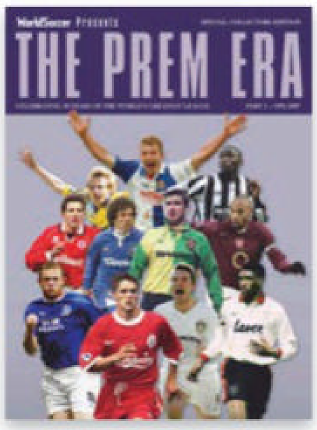
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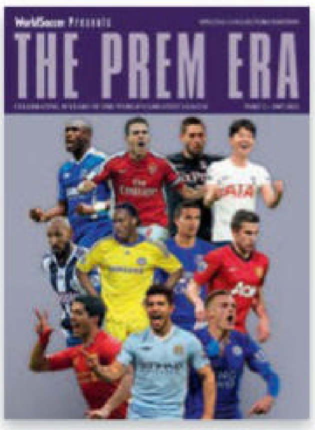
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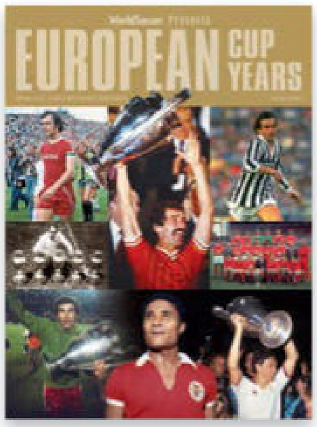
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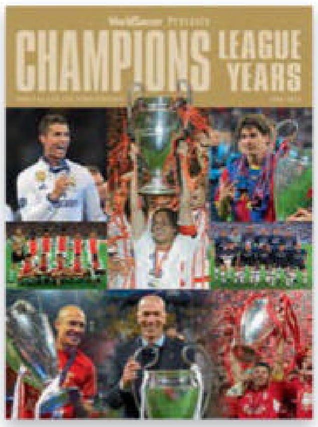
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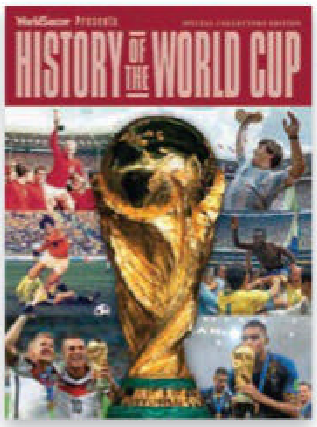
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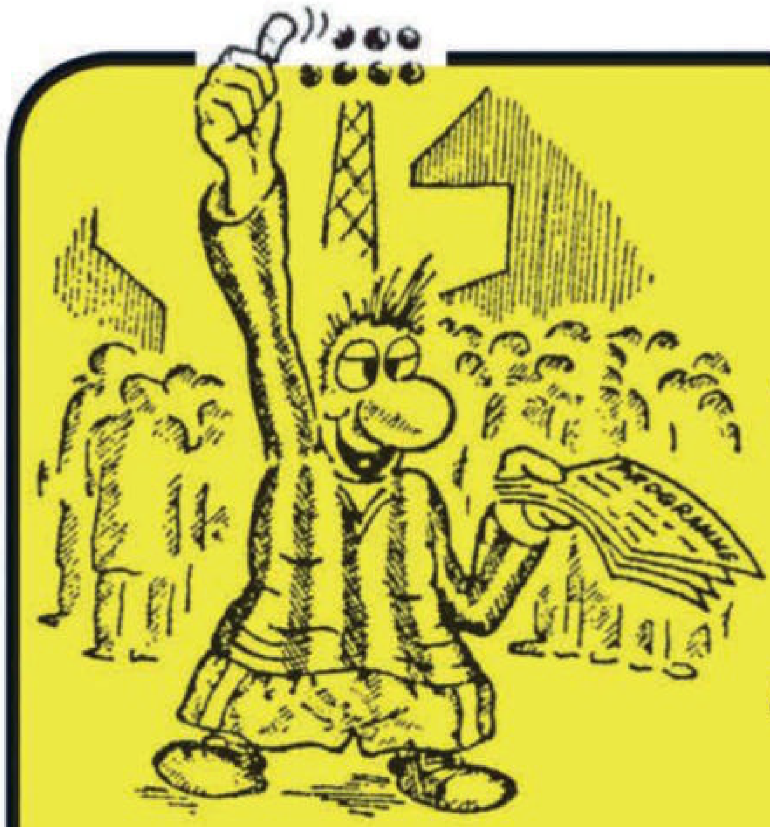

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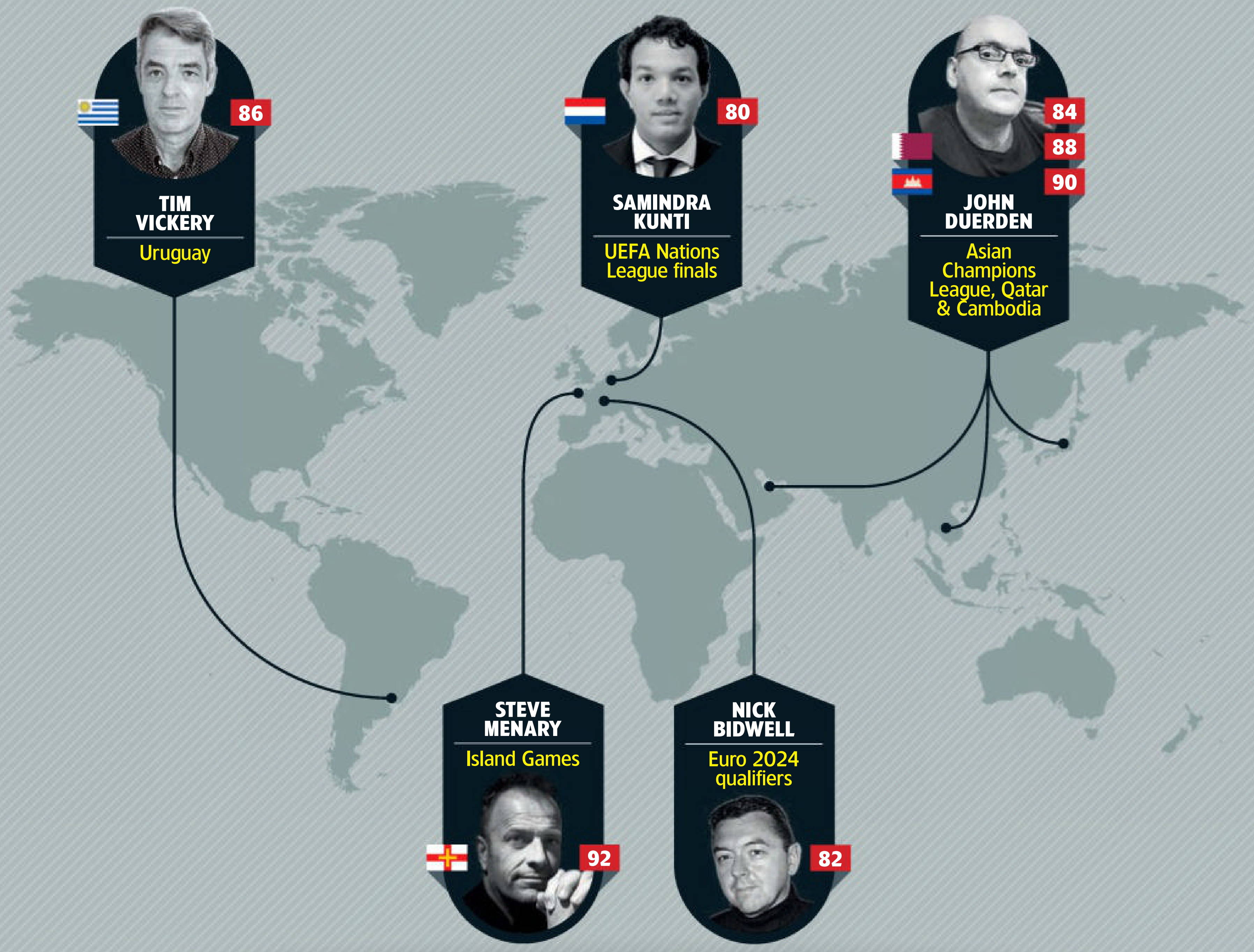

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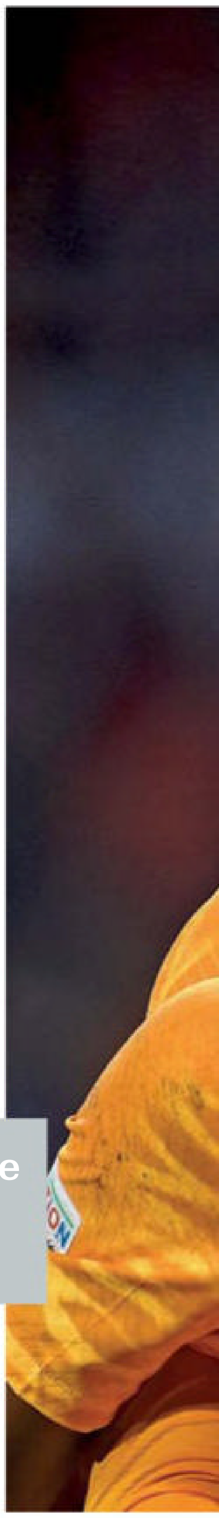
UEFA Nations League finals

Third edition of the competition's finals set to take place in the Netherlands



Days after the UEFA Champions League final in Istanbul on June 10, the European football season will draw to a close in the Netherlands, with the finals of the Nations League staged across two venues in Rotterdam and Enschede.

Croatia, Italy and Spain will join the hosts in competing for the crown of a tournament that has slowly become a familiar fixture of the international match calendar, but runs the risk of becoming just another tournament given all the calendar congestion. There is more expansion of the competition to come as well, but originally the Nations League was established to replace meaningless friendlies with competitive football.

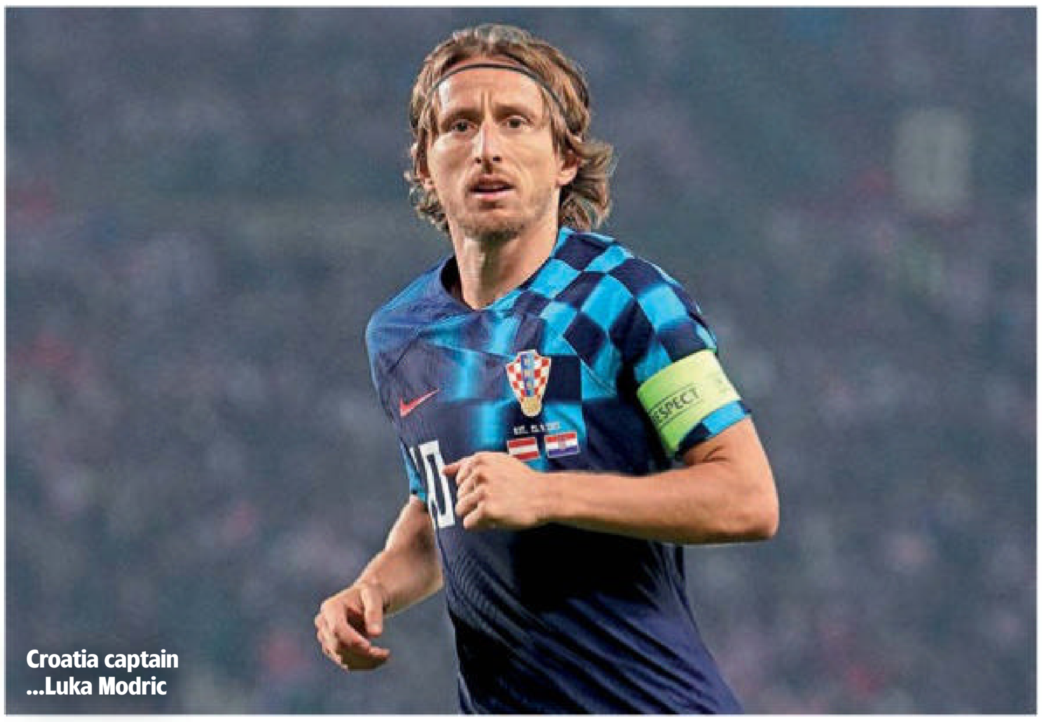
UEFA has certainly succeeded in achieving that goal, as demonstrated by the strength of the final four. In the first semi-final at De Kuip, Feyenoord's mythic home ground, the Dutch will play Croatia. Neither side had an easy route to the Nations League; the *Oranje* impressed with a resounding 4-1 win in Belgium, exposing the frailties of the Red Devils who later unravelled at the World Cup, but then laboured to a home draw with Poland. They booked their ticket with a 1-0 win over Belgium in Amsterdam. Unbeaten in the Nations League, the Dutch have a new coach with Ronald Koeman in charge for his second spell. Koeman has a different paying style from his predecessor, Louis van Gaal, and will seek to build a competitive team for Euro 2024. The Nations League will provide his team with valuable playing time against top-notch opposition. In the form of Virgil van Dijk, Frenkie de Jong and Memphis Depay, they have plenty of talent across the pitch, but the days of Dutch names rolling off everyone's tongues are over; indeed, you could be forgiven for knowing more Croatian players.

A regular fixture in the international game, the Croatians finished third in Qatar. They took the prize scalp of Brazil in dramatic fashion before falling to Lionel Messi in Lusail, but reaching the semi-finals four years after making the World Cup final itself is no mean feat. A draw with France and two wins against Denmark ensured them of top spot in their Nations League group. In the Netherlands they will be led once again by 37-year-old schemer Luka Modric, whose consistency at the highest level remains striking. It almost needs no repeating: he makes the team tick with his experience, vision, touch and passing and, alongside his midfield partners in crime, Mateo Kovacic and Marcelo Brozovic, he provides the heart of the team. With centre-back Josko Gvardiol behind them, it is an enviable spine, even if they lack an outstanding centre-forward. Tottenham's Ivan Perisic is currently the team's leading goalscorer.

On the touchline, Zlatko Dalic is another familiar face, remaining in charge of Croatia – to great success – since 2017. Modric's eventual retirement from the national team will present Dalic with his biggest challenge but, for now, he can count on the services of the Real Madrid superstar and that may make them slight favourites to defeat the Dutch – even on home soil.

> **Whoever lines up in the Italian attack will be licking their lips at the prospect of playing a Spanish side that are currently in transition**

The winners will play Italy or Spain, who renew their rivalry in the other semi-final. In the last edition of the finals, Spain ended Italy's run of 37 games unbeaten, with Barcelona's Gavi debuting and flourishing. At the time, the Italians were unflustered, still high



Croatia captain ...Luka Modric

One to watch... Italy's new striker Mateo Retegui

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Hosts...the finals will be played in the Netherlands

Spot secured ...Alvaro Morata celebrates with Nico Williams after scoring against Portugal

on the euphoria of claiming the Euro 2020 crown. Today however, things are different. After missing out on World Cup qualification for the second consecutive time, the Nations League offers a chance for some redemption.

En route, they were thrashed 5-2 by Germany, but they came good with back-to-back wins against England and Hungary to top their group. England got their revenge by winning in Naples during March's Euro 2024 qualifiers, but the game did see the emergence of Argentina-born striker Mateo Retegui, who will hope to impress again against Spain and prove that he is the solution to Italy's attacking problems.

Whoever lines up in the Italian attack will be licking their lips at the prospect of playing a Spanish side that are currently in transition under new boss Luis de la Fuente. In March, an inexperienced back four failed to keep out Scotland and Scott McTominay during a 2-0 defeat in Glasgow, and even their Nations League campaign was inconsistent and unconvincing. They lost at home to Switzerland and needed a late equaliser to avoid another defeat against Czech Republic, eventually securing top spot with a dramatic win in Portugal thanks to a late strike from Alvaro Morata.

De la Fuente knows the players well from his work with the youth teams, and must maximise the talents of Gavi, Pedri and others in order to be successful. If he can do so, a first Nations League title is very much up for grabs, and would be the perfect springboard for his spell in the hot seat.

Europe

NICK BIDWELL

Euro 2024 qualifying

Some teams are already under pressure on the road to the 2024 European Championship ahead of June's fixtures

Perfect start... Scotland are full of confidence

In buoyant mood after a sensational home victory over Spain in March, Scotland certainly will not be short of confidence as they prepare for their next series of Group A challenges: a trip to Norway and Georgia's visit to Hampden Park. With a maximum six points already in the bag and clear signs that Steve Clarke's side are slap-bang in an exciting new era of renewal, Tartan Army fans are quite rightly dreaming of spending next summer navigating Germany's Autobahn and rail networks.

The match in Oslo represents the ultimate test of Scotland's mettle. Not only must they find a way to neuter the goalscoring machine that is Erling Haaland; they will have to do so while short-handed in defence, with Grant Hanley of Norwich City out with an Achilles injury and Leeds United's Liam Cooper also struggling for fitness. Expect a feisty, full-blooded encounter in Norway, with the Scots aiming to get in the face of Haaland and in-form playmaker Martin Odegaard.

It's crunch time in Group F, where the three most prominent nations – Belgium, Austria and Sweden – go head-to-head in battles rich in psychological significance. Austria, who won their first two qualifiers under new coach Ralf Rangnick, will be aiming to maintain the momentum when travelling to Brussels to meet the Belgians. The Austrians have not won in Belgium in 64 long years and probably would accept a point if it was offered to them now. Belgium undoubtedly are favourites. On the evidence of their first game in this group – a 3-0 win in Sweden – new boss Domenico Tedesco has given the side a better balance, as competent out of possession as going forward.

Three days later, the Austria-Sweden clash in Vienna has just as much riding on it. Sweden's coach Janne Andersson is coming under increasing pressure regarding his personnel choices and insistence on sticking to a conservative and inflexible 4-4-2 system. The Swedes desperately need more production from frontrunners Alexander Isak and Viktor

Coach and captain…Belgium's Domenico Tedesco and Kevin De Bruyne deep in discussion

Gyokeres, who have so far failed to replicate their impressive domestic form on the international stage – hence the continued presence of the 41-year-old Zlatan Ibrahimovic as the team's joker in the pack.

Austria would dearly love to cross the border for next year's European Championship in Germany, and the good news for Rangnick is that he will have a number of key players – including striker Marko Arnautovic, midfield enforcer Xaver Schlager and stopper Philipp Lienhart – back after injury lay-offs.

> It's crunch time in Group F, where the three most prominent nations – Belgium, Austria and Sweden – go head-to-head in battles rich in psychological significance

In Group D, the ever-resilient Welsh will have to be on their guard in Turkey. As the Dragons proved when debutant Nathan Broadhead netted a last-gasp equaliser in a 1-1 draw in Croatia in March, there is a steely, indomitable core to Robert Page's side that will be needed once again in a white-hot Turkish atmosphere.

The Turks have their backs against the wall after failing to impress in their opening two qualifiers, scraping a 2-1 win in Armenia and sloppily losing 2-0 at home to group leaders Croatia. Coach Stefan Kuntz has several vital issues to resolve: the fact that he has yet to decide on a settled first-choice line-up, his indecision over numbers in the back line, the poor body language of many players and the lack of a natural centre-forward. Skipper and creative midfielder Hakan Calhanoglu will need to step forward and take charge, something that he has so far been unable to do.

In Group E, Sylvinho will hope to collect his first points as Albania coach against Moldova and the Faroe Islands following a narrow but encouraging 1-0 defeat to Poland in March. The Poles only have one Euro qualifier this month, facing Germany in a friendly in their other match, which could offer an idea of their early progress under new head coach Fernando Santos.

After suffering a shock 3-2 defeat away to Kazakhstan – a game in which they carelessly threw away a two-goal advantage – Denmark will be anxious to recover the lost ground in Group H, and that means at least four points from a home encounter against Northern Ireland and an expedition to Slovenia, who won both their opening games. Can up-and-coming 20-year-old Danish striker Rasmus Hojlund keep up the good work? With five goals in his nation's first two qualifiers, he has set the bar incredibly high.

Elsewhere, France and England have the chance to stretch their advantages at the top of Groups B and C, with their respective rivals Netherlands and Italy both taking part in the Nations League finals, while Serbia (Group G), Romania and Switzerland (Group I) and Portugal (Group J), will be aiming to keep their 100 per cent winning records intact.

Backs against the wall…Turkey skipper Hakan Calhanoglu will be key to their improvement

CURRENT STANDINGS

	Group A	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Scotland	2	2	0	0	+5	6
2	Spain	2	1	0	1	+1	3
3	Georgia	1	0	1	0	0	1
4	Norway	2	0	1	1	-3	1
5	Cyprus	1	0	0	1	-3	0

	Group B	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	France	2	2	0	0	+5	6
2	Greece	1	1	0	0	+3	3
3	Netherlands	2	1	0	1	-1	3
4	Rep. of Ireland	1	0	0	1	-1	0
5	Gibraltar	2	0	0	2	-6	0

	Group C	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	England	2	2	0	0	+3	6
2	Italy	2	1	0	1	+1	3
3	N. Macedonia	1	1	0	0	+1	3
4	Ukraine	1	0	0	1	-2	0
5	Malta	2	0	0	2	-3	0

	Group D	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Croatia	2	1	1	0	+2	4
2	Wales	2	1	1	0	+1	4
3	Turkey	2	1	0	1	-1	3
4	Armenia	1	0	0	1	-1	0
5	Latvia	1	0	0	1	-1	0

	Group E	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Czech Republic	2	1	1	0	+2	4
2	Poland	2	1	0	1	-1	3
3	Moldova	2	0	2	0	0	2
4	Faroe Islands	1	0	1	0	0	1
5	Albania	1	0	0	1	-1	0

	Group F	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Austria	2	2	0	0	+4	6
2	Belgium	1	1	0	0	+3	3
3	Sweden	2	1	0	1	+2	3
4	Estonia	1	0	0	1	-1	0
5	Azerbaijan	2	0	0	2	-8	0

	Group G	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Serbia	2	2	0	0	+4	6
2	Hungary	1	1	0	0	+3	3
3	Montenegro	2	1	0	1	-1	3
4	Lithuania	1	0	0	1	-2	0
5	Bulgaria	2	0	0	2	-4	0

	Group H	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Slovenia	2	2	0	0	+3	6
2	Denmark	2	1	0	1	+1	3
3	Kazakhstan	2	1	0	1	0	3
4	Finland	2	1	0	1	-1	3
5	N. Ireland	2	1	0	1	+1	3
6	San Marino	2	0	0	2	-4	0

	Group I	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Switzerland	2	2	0	0	+8	6
2	Romania	2	2	0	0	+3	6
3	Kosovo	2	0	2	0	0	2
4	Andorra	2	0	1	1	-2	1
5	Israel	2	0	1	1	-3	1
6	Belarus	2	0	0	2	-6	0

	Group J	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Portugal	2	2	0	0	+10	6
2	Slovakia	2	1	1	0	+2	4
3	Bosnia & Herz.	2	1	0	1	+1	3
4	Iceland	2	1	0	1	+4	3
5	Luxembourg	2	0	1	1	-6	1
6	Liechtenstein	2	0	0	2	-11	0

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Asia is red

Urawa Red Diamonds of Japan overcome Saudi giants Al Hilal in the 2022 Asian Champions League final

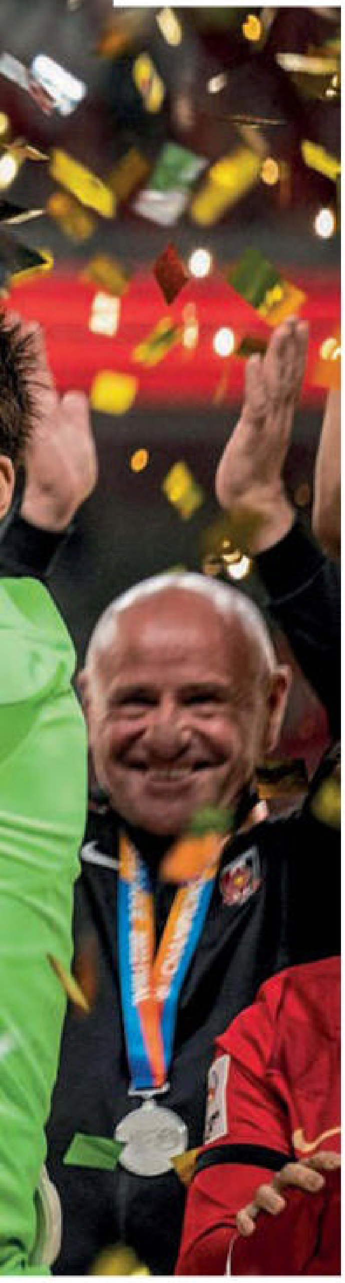
Review
AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

For the third time in six years, Urawa Reds of Japan met Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal in the final of the AFC Champions League and, for the second time, the eastern team won. It was another tight contest: the first leg in Riyadh ended 1-1 on April 29, before the Reds took the second 1-0 in front of 53,574 delighted fans in Saitama Stadium a week later.

It meant that instead of Al Hilal, who started the tie as defending champions, extending their record continental title haul from four to five, Urawa moved to three crowns, adding to 2007 and 2017; not bad for a team that have only won the J. League once, back in 2006.

Al Hilal started as favourites and will feel that they should have taken control of the tie in the first leg. Leading 1-0 at half-time thanks to a goal from Salem Al Dawsari, the talismanic winger who scored the winner against Argentina in November, the Blues looked comfortable. Then, shortly after the restart, centre-half Ali Al Bulayhi went to intercept a through

Game-changing…Al Hilal talisman Salem Al Dawsari is sent off during the first leg in Riyadh



Champions of Asia… Urawa Reds celebrate with their trophy

ball midway inside his own half and somehow diverted it against his own post instead. Shinzo Koroki was on hand to slot home the rebound.

If that was unfortunate, Al Dawsari was later careless. The star was red-carded for kicking out at Ken Iwao. It was the second time that he had seen red against Urawa, having been sent off in the 2017 final, as Al Hilal lost. By contrast, when the two teams met again in 2019, he stayed on the pitch and scored in the second leg as the Saudis triumphed. This time he did both and ruled himself out of the return match.

> Urawa Red Diamonds moved to three crowns, adding to 2007 and 2017; not bad for a team that have only won the J. League once

Al Dawsari wasn't the only absentee. Salman Al Faraj, captain of club and country, picked up another injury and missed the trip to Japan, while Saudi Arabia's left-back Yasser Al Shahrani has just recovered from the sickening collision that he suffered late in that World Cup win against Argentina and wasn't registered for the final stages.

No wonder then that coach Ramon Diaz blamed the defeat on fatigue and his club's hectic schedule. The Argentine had a point. Almost half of Saudi Arabia's World Cup squad are Hilal players. The club played three games at the Club World Cup in February, defeating the African and South American champions, Wydad Casablanca and Flamengo, on the way to a 5-3 defeat at the hands of Real Madrid in the final. Later in the same month there were three knockout Champions League ties and the climax of the Saudi Arabian league season, with Hilal desperately trying to stay in the running for the title. Given all that, it is no surprise that it all caught up with them.

Urawa had it easier in that regard. They played their semi-final last August in the east zone – the tournament is split into two halves until the final. This was an elongated edition due to the World Cup and change in format that will see the next edition (2023-24) become the first to be a European-style August to May rather than the previous February to November.

The long wait for the Reds meant that there was a new coach in place for the final as Maciej Skorza, who had a short time in charge of Saudi Arabia's Ettifaq a decade earlier, replaced Ricardo Rodriguez. Under the Pole, Urawa had a decent start to the domestic season and it was clear that defensive organisation and smart counter-attacks were the plan. The Japanese team were happy for Al Hilal to have over 70 per cent possession in 180 minutes of football. Even with all that possession, the Saudis were unable to create enough chances for in-form striker Odion Ighalo.

The Reds had better chances in the second leg, but were aided by a second-half own goal by Andre Carrillo. After his opportunistic goal in the first leg, Koroki had came closest in the first half with a flying acrobatic volley that hit the bar.

At the other end goalkeeper Shusaku Nishizawa barely put a glove wrong. After making a stunning save from Moussa Marega in the first leg, he made another crucial last-minute stop from Ighalo in the second leg. He was well-protected by Scandinavian centre-back pairing Alexander Scholz of Denmark and Norway's Marius Hoibraten, whose header in the second leg led – assisted by the windy conditions – to the goal. Right-back Hiroki Sakai, formerly of Marseille and Hannover, was another standout star and was named the tournament's MVP.

It was a victory celebrated in Japan and Poland. "I can say that today we didn't have it easy on the pitch," said Skorza, "We experienced different moments, but felt support. It's something wonderful."

Unlucky…Peru international Andre Carrillo scores the decisive own goal in Saitama

TIM VICKERY

Another title for Penarol

The country's most successful club top the Apertura table amidst changing times in Uruguayan football

Cycles of success in Uruguay are inevitably short. Occasionally a small club breaks through and briefly interrupts the dominance of the big two, before the side is broken apart and normal service resumes. And with such a small domestic market, even the traditional Montevideo giants are unable to keep a good team together.

Last year belonged to Nacional, but with both Luis Suarez and key midfielder Felipe Carballo decamping to Gremio in Brazil, the pendulum swung back towards Penarol, who won the 15-game Apertura with two rounds to spare. This means that in Uruguay's convoluted three-stage season (also including the Torneo Intermedio and Clausura), Penarol are guaranteed a place in the end-of-year decider when the overall champions for 2023 are defined.

The way was paved for Penarol's triumph in the early weeks of the season. Nacional began badly, with Argentine coach Ricardo Zielinski swiftly giving way to Alvaro Gutierrez. Penarol, meanwhile, came out of the gates hot, with loan signing Matias Arezo in magnificent form. A 20-year-old forward in the stocky, explosive, Sergio Aguero mould, Arezo was a teenage sensation with Uruguay's little River Plate. A move to Granada in Spain did not come off, but back home

Celebrations... Penarol lift the Apertura trophy

Review
CAMPEONATO URUGUAYO
TORNEO APERTURA

Magnificent form ...Penarol's on-loan striker Matias Arezo

with Penarol he helped himself to eight goals in the first six matchdays of the championship. When he slowed down, former Hull City centre-forward Abel Hernandez took up some of the slack.

A single-goal defeat to Liverpool in mid-season was Penarol's only loss as they held their early advantage and cruised to the title, never seriously threatened despite a Nacional revival. For Alfredo Arias, one of those roving Uruguayan coaches, who has spent most of his time elsewhere in South America, this was his second title in his home country after winning the 2014 Clausura with Wanderers where he first made his name.

> For all the inevitable limitations of its domestic league, the Uruguayan game remains a splendid developer of young talent

But Arias did not enhance his international reputation with a disastrous start to Penarol's Copa Sudamericana campaign. Admittedly in a tough group, Penarol suffered heavy defeats in all three of their opening games. In the same competition Danubio have hopes of reaching the knockout rounds.

Meanwhile in the main event, the Copa Libertadores, Nacional led their group at the halfway stage. By the time the action kicked off in April, Nacional were over their early-season blues, and a sequence of late goals helped them pick up valuable points. The last 16 then, is a realistic objective – but anything after that is a bonus. Uruguay were a huge force in the early years of the Libertadores, but once the global market opened up, and TV revenue became important, it has been very hard for the country to compete. Nacional were the last Uruguayan winners of the competition – 35 years ago. Since 1989 only one Uruguayan club has reached the final.

With Boston River and Deportivo Maldonado bowing out in the qualifying rounds, little Liverpool, playing the group phase for the first time, are Uruguay's only other Libertadores representatives, and they would seem to have no chance of making the cut.

Liverpool's main objective, though, is to blood promising young players, giving them experience and visibility. Central midfielder Fabricio Diaz and striker Luciano Rodriguez will be filling scouts' notebooks during the Under-20 World Cup – and also will surely be attracting the attention of new national team coach Marcelo Bielsa.

For all the inevitable limitations of its domestic league, the Uruguayan game remains a splendid developer of young talent and, with the old guard of Suarez, Edinson Cavani, Diego Godin, Martin Caceres and company now about to leave the scene after four World Cups, it will be fascinating to see what Bielsa does with the new generation. It is not hard to imagine him attempting to construct an exciting side based on the dynamism of Federico Valverde in midfield, with Darwin Nunez ahead of him and Ronald Araujo behind. But Bielsa is unlikely to restrict his obsessive observations to top-level European football. He will also be running the rule over youngsters in Uruguay's domestic league in the hope that some of them can go on to cover themselves in glory in the famous sky blue shirt.

One of the best stories of the Apertura was the first-division debut of La Luz, a traditional Montevideo club who won promotion at the end of last year. Their top scorer – and joint-second overall – was Nico Schiappacasse, once a great hope who was on the books of Atletico Madrid. His life went off the rails to such an extent that he went to prison last year after being found in possession of a firearm. Still just 24, hopefully the sleek striker has found the light at La Luz.

New Uruguay coach ...Marcelo Bielsa

Qatar

JOHN DUERDEN

New stars in town

Hernan Crespo's Al Duhail dethrone Al Sadd after two dominant seasons

Al Duhail stars... Nam Tae-hee and Michael Olunga

For the second time in less than six months, the headlines in Qatar belong to a certain South American country. "Argentines are lucky in Qatar," said Hernan Crespo in May after his Al Duhail side were crowned champions of the Qatar Stars League.

The former Parma, Lazio, Inter, Chelsea and Milan striker won plenty of trophies as a player and is doing pretty well as a coach too, collecting silverware in his homeland with Defensa y Justicia and then in Brazil with Sao Paulo. In March, he headed to Qatar and is now celebrating the treble. For the first time in three years, Al Duhail are champions and there are already questions as to whether Crespo will follow past winning coaches Xavi and Javi Gracia to Europe.

The two Spaniards each led Al Sadd to a championship title in the past two years. Both triumphs were emphatically achieved without losing a single game and, incredibly, just ten points dropped across the two 22-match campaigns. Their winning margins above Al Duhail (who were second on both occasions) were 13 and 15 points respectively, while the combined goal difference over the 44 games during the two seasons was +119. In other words, it was total dominance.

So when Crespo's Al Duhail drew one and lost one of the opening two games this time around, it looked like their title chances may already be over. Then, they started winning, helped by plenty of local talent – although national team striker Almoez Ali did not have his best season – South Korea's Nam Tae-hee in midfield and, of course, the goalscoring machine that is Michael Olunga. The Kenyan striker was the J. League's top scorer with Kashiwa Reysol in 2020, and has continued to score at a prodigious rate since arriving in Qatar at the start of 2021. In his first season he bagged the Golden Boot in the Asian Champions League, and he finished first in Qatar's striking standings in each of the last two seasons too – 25 last season and 22 this time.

Afforded more freedom...Al Sadd playmaker Santi Cazorla

More Argentine success in Qatar...Al Duhail's title-winning coach Hernan Crespo

Olunga, who has been linked with a European move, was needed at the end as Al Duhail lost the penultimate game 3-1 at home to Al Sadd. By that time, the champions were out of the running for the title but were still able to rouse themselves against their biggest rivals. Going into the final day, Crespo's men were two points clear of Al Arabi. The chasing team had a tough game at Al Sadd yet went there and won 2-1, meaning that Al Duhail needed to beat relegation-threatened Al Shamal.

"The Al Shamal match is our last chance to win the league title," said Crespo. "So far, we are still on top of the standings and we must complete our work by winning the league title. There is an opportunity for that and we must take advantage of it, and we must trust ourselves."

> "Argentines are lucky in Qatar"
> Al Duhail coach Hernan Crespo

It could have been a banana skin but, in the end, it proved to be no problem. Olunga scored four goals – after Almoez had opened the scoring – in a comfortable 5-2 win. The visitors scored early in the second half to reduce the arrears to 4-1 and again in stoppage-time, but that was of little consolation as they went down.

Al Duhail's 51 points would not have come close to winning in the previous two seasons but nobody cared, especially as it completed the treble. In April, they won the Qatar Cup, defeating Al Sadd 2-0 in the final. A fortnight earlier, they came back from behind against the same opposition in the semi-final of the Qatari Stars Cup to win 3-1 and then went on to beat Umm Salal 1-0 in the final. The only black spot was a 7-0 defeat at the hands of Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal in the semi-final of the Asian Champions League but, overall, Crespo can look back on a hugely successful season.

Al Sadd finished third after losing six league games – their last league defeat before this season had been in March 2020. On the face of it, coach Juanma Lillo, who left Pep Guardiola's side at Manchester City in 2022 to take the job, struggled. Yet there were signs, with 12 wins from the last 15 games including the victory over Al Duhail, of improvement as the season went on and the players starting to get to grips with what was being asked of them. Lillo gave the likes of Santi Cazorla and Akram Afif – Qatar's big hope who struggled like the rest of the team at the World Cup – much more freedom to roam in a fluid style. There may not have been trophies but Al Sadd were not that far away. Patience is not often common in the Middle East but, if Lillo stays and Crespo resists Europe, next season should be a fascinating battle.

Cambodia

JOHN DUERDEN

Chaotic end to SEA Games

Indonesia win 2023 Southeast Asian Games in a dramatic final overshadowed by touchline brawls

It was a final that will never be forgotten in Indonesia as the nation won football gold at the 2023 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games on May 16 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Leading 2-1 in the 98th minute, the coaching staff ran onto the pitch to celebrate what they thought was the final whistle, only for the referee to award a free-kick to Thailand. The ball was subsequently launched into the Indonesian penalty-area and, sure enough, substitute Yotsakorn Burapha pounced to fire the ball in and take the game to extra-time.

But the drama was far from over. Indonesia retook the lead almost immediately – just 50 seconds into extra-time – sparking the wildest of mass brawls on the touchline and a red card each for players who had swapped punches. By the end, there were two more reds for Thailand who finished with eight players, two more goals for Indonesia – including one by a player named Beckham – and, crucially, a first-ever gold, as they ran out 5-2 winners.

The gold medal may help erase some of the disappointment still felt in Jakarta at being stripped, in March, of the Under-20 World Cup. There was not a global audience for this dramatic triumph, but the country's young talent (this is an Under-22 tournament) was on display with attacking midfielder Marselino Ferdinan impressing as well as forwards Fajar Fathur Rahman and Ramadhan Sananta, who both finished with five goals each. Their group may have been the easier of the two but still, winning four out of four, scoring 13 and conceding just once set them up nicely for a semi-final against Vietnam. That was a thriller too, with a 96th-minute goal from Taufany Muslihuddin giving

CHAYAPIPAT
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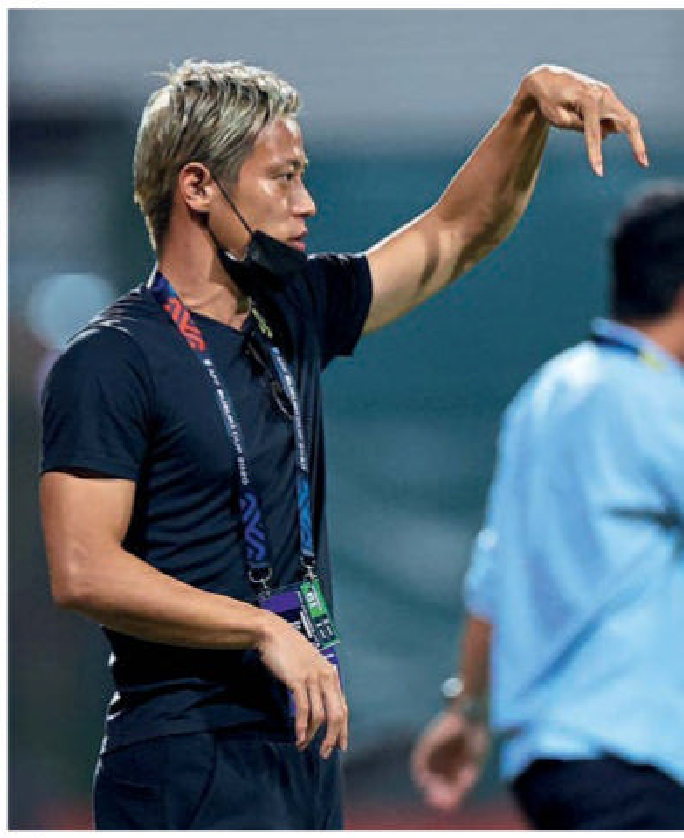
CAMBODIA 2023

One to watch... Indonesia's star player Marselino Ferdinan shoots during the final

Chaos...fighting breaks out on the touchline during the SEA Games final



Stepping down...former Cambodia boss Keisuke Honda

them a 3-2 win – despite having a player sent off – and the date with Thailand in the final, favourites and seven-time winners.

Thailand strolled through the group stage, winning three and drawing one. The young War Elephants then made short work of Myanmar with a 3-0 win in their last-four clash to earn a final against Indonesia.

Despite the controversial loss, Thailand's year has been promising. In January the senior side won the ASEAN Football Federation (AFF) Championship, the region's big biennial bash. With the 2023 Asian Cup on the horizon and the continent's usual four spots increasing to eight at the 2026 World Cup, there are reasons to be cheerful for fans in the Land of Smiles. After the rise of Vietnam in the last few years, Thailand now feel they are once again undisputed top dogs in the football-loving region of 650 million.

Myanmar and Vietnam may have been disappointed to exit at the semi-final stage – with the latter winning the bronze medal match – but they had nothing on the Philippines and Singapore, who both have ambitions of being major regional forces and who both finished rock bottom of their groups.

Singapore's international struggles continued. This was the fifth straight SEA Games in which the young Lions didn't make it out of the group stage, but the first in which they did not win a single game, drawing one and losing three. Worse was the 7-0 thrashing at the hands of neighbours and bitter rivals Malaysia, and not a single shot on target. It led to lamentations back home that Singapore can no longer count themselves as one of the region's leading powers. No doubt that the gap has been growing in terms of leading nations Thailand and Vietnam, but there are also worrying signs when it comes to the likes of Malaysia and Myanmar.

> By the end, there were two more reds for Thailand who finished with eight, two more goals for Indonesia...and, crucially, a first-ever gold, as they ran out 5-2 winners

In between come Cambodia. There is more passion in the host nation than most in Asia, but past conflicts and instability in the country meant that it was only really in the 1990s that they started to compete regularly on the international stage. In recent years talented young players such as Chan Vathanaka and Keo Sokpheng emerged and started to play elsewhere in Southeast Asia and, with friendlies attracting crowds of 50,000 in Phnom Penh, there has been optimism.

COVID slowed down the progress but the SEA games were a chance to show that the country can host a major tournament and also an opportunity to show that there was more young talent coming through. Then there was the arrival of Keisuke Honda in 2018. The former Japan international does not have his coaching badges, meaning he can't officially be head coach, but the ex-Milan man has been the driving force behind the introduction of a more possession-based, fluid style.

It started with a 4-0 win over Timor-Leste but the second game ended with the Philippines scoring a late equaliser. With Indonesia sealing top spot, Cambodia had to beat Myanmar for second but ended up losing 2-0. The young Angkor Warriors ended up just falling short and Honda called it a day, leaving these two weeks in Phnom Penh to belong to Indonesia.

Guernsey

STEVE MENARY

Football returns to the Island Games

Hosts Guernsey will be favourites in July for the tournament's first renewal since 2017

Holders...Isle of Man celebrate after beating Greenland 6-0 in the 2017 final

With the biennial Island Games postponed in 2021 due to COVID, and Gibraltar 2019 unable to host football due to a shortage of pitches on the island, this year sees football return to the tournament for the first time in six years.

Football will be one of 12 sports at this year's Games – which will feature up to 24 non-sovereign islands, mostly from Europe – with the competition made up of four groups and the winners heading to the semi-finals.

GROUP 1
Guernsey, Western Isles, Aland, Isle of Wight
The last of Guernsey's three titles was in 2015, but home support and a squad drawn largely from Guernsey FC that play in the Isthmian South at level eight of the English pyramid should make the hosts the team to beat.

Guernsey's strongest opponents in Group 1 will be the Isle of Wight, who won the title in 2011 as hosts, beating Guernsey 4-2 in the final. Their squad is drawn largely from Cowes and Newport but has six players from the English mainland, including captain Ryan Woodford from ambitious Wessex League side AFC Portchester.

GROUP 2
Isle of Man, Ynys Mon, Falkland Islands, Shetland Islands
Only six of the 20 players brought by 2017 winners the Isle of Man come from IOMFC, who play in the English ninth-tier North West Counties League Premier Division, with the rest drawn from island clubs to aid development.

Contenders ...Greenland defender Patrick Frederiksen

In 2019, a separate unofficial Inter Island tournament was hosted and won by Ynys Mon. The Welsh island's squad only includes five players with previous official Games tournament experience. Veteran forward Mel McGinness, who scored the winner in 2019, returns for a third Games, while Tom Taylor of Southern Premier League Central Bromsgrove adds experience in defence.

Shetland's only victory was in 2005 against Guernsey. Coach Neil Fenwick, who hopes to recruit two players from the mainland, says: "The goal has to be to win the tournament but we understand that to do so will take a massive effort and a fair bit of good fortune."

Group 2 also includes the Falkland Islands, who will be well prepared but hampered by a tiny playing pool and lack of warm-up opposition. Flights alone cost £25,000 and only six players have played at previous Games. Manager Troyd Bowles says: "Our group is about as tough as it could be. If we were to somehow get a result in any of the group matches, it would arguably be [our] best result ever at an Island Games."

GROUP 3
Greenland, Bermuda, Froya, Orkney
Winning the Games was a springboard to FIFA membership for the Faroe Islands (1989 and 1991) and Gibraltar (2007) and Greenland hope victory will aid their bid to join CONCACAF.

> Winning the tournament was a springboard to FIFA membership for the Faroe Islands and Gibraltar

Under Morten Rutkjaer, Greenland have never been better prepared with a training camp in Turkey and a game against Kosovo U21s, and hope to beat their previous best of silver in 2013 and 2017. Rutkjaer says: "The match against Bermuda in particular will be exciting, so we can measure ourselves against a CONCACAF team. There is still a long way to go, but we are dreaming big."

GROUP 4
Menorca, Jersey, Gozo, St Helena
In Group 4, Jersey are favourites with a squad drawn from Jersey Bulls, who play in the ninth tier of English football in the Combined Counties League Premier Division South. Gozo and the South Atlantic island of St Helena make their official debut in a tournament that was oversubscribed with 19 entrants and three sides left out after a draw.

JUNE 10-JULY 7

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

European wonderkids

The European Under-19 Championship kicks off in Malta on July 3 with the final set to take place a fortnight later on July 16. Meanwhile Romania and Georgia will co-host the Under-21 tournament – the 24th edition of the Championship – which starts on June 21 and concludes on July 8, with Germany, England, France, Portugal and Spain the favourites.

WINNERS
UEFA UNDER21 CHAMPIONSHIP 2021

Holders... Germany won the U21 Euros in 2021

Copa crunch time

The group stage of the 2023 Copa Libertadores concludes at the end of June, before the knockout rounds begin in August. This season's competition has already featured plenty of intriguing storylines, with more likely to come.

Perfect start ...Fluminense won their first three Copa Libertadores matches

Euro 2024 qualifiers

As we saw last summer, playing international matches at the end of a long and tiring club season doesn't always make for high-quality encounters, but it can produce some surprising results. England, for example, will want to avoid a repeat of last year's stunning 4-0 defeat to Hungary when they take on Malta in Ta'Qali and North Macedonia in Manchester. France, Belgium and Portugal will be wary of similar banana-skin ties against Greece, Estonia and Iceland respectively, while Turkey v Wales will have a big say on the outcome of Group D.

Under-20 World Cup climax

The semi-finals of the Under-20 World Cup take place on June 8, with both the third-place play-off and final following three days later. Every game of the tournament, which is being played in Argentina, is being broadcast on FIFA+ so every minute is available to watch.

5 unmissable matches

- **Manchester City v Internazionale, June 10**
  The biggest club match in football hardly needs an introduction. The task of halting Manchester City's ascension to their first Champions League crown falls to Simone Inzaghi's Inter. Istanbul's Ataturk Olympic Stadium is the venue.
- **United States v Mexico, June 15**
  Three years out from their co-hosting of the 2026 World Cup, this is a massive summer for football in the United States, Mexico and CONCACAF – starting with this Nations League semi-final clash.
- **Netherlands/Croatia v Spain/Italy, June 18**
  Rotterdam's historic De Kuip stadium plays host to this year's UEFA Nations League final. Both the Netherlands and Spain have lost at this stage of the competition before, so would love to make up for those disappointments.

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Up for grabs...the UEFA Nations League trophy

- **England U21 v Germany U21, June 28**
  Under Aidy Boothroyd, England flopped at the 2021 Euro U21 finals. This clash – arguably the standout fixture of this year's group stage – will be the biggest test to date for new boss Lee Carsley.
- **FC Cincinnati v New England Revolution, July 2**
  The end of the club season on one side of the Atlantic gives MLS the chance to attract some new European fans. FC Cincinnati, the outstanding early front-runners, meet New England Revolution at the top of the Eastern Conference.

U20 World Cup... hosts Argentina in action v Uzbekistan

Club Football

EUROPE

2022-23 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

May 9 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Vinicius Junior 36)
Manchester City (Eng) 1 (De Bruyne 67)

May 10 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 0
Internazionale (Ita) 2 (Dzeko 8, Mkhitaryan 11)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 16 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Martinez 74)
Milan (Ita) 0
Internazionale win 3-0 on aggregate

May 17 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 4 (B. Silva 23, 37, Akanji 76, Alvarez 90+1)
Real Madrid (Spa) 0
Manchester City win 5-1 on aggregate

2022-23 UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

May 11 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 1 (Gatti 90+7)
Sevilla (Spa) 1 (En-Nesyri 26)

May 11 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 1 (Bove 63)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 18 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 0
Roma (Ita) 0
Roma win 1-0 on aggregate

May 18 – Seville
Sevilla (Spa) 2 (Suso 71, Lamela 95)
Juventus (Ita) 1 (Vlahovic 65)
After Extra-Time. Sevilla win 3-2 on aggregate

2022-23 UEFA EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

May 11 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 1 (Cabral 25)
Basel (Sui) 2 (Diouf 71, Amdouni 90+3)

May 11 – London
West Ham United (Eng) 2 (Benrahma 67 pen, Antonio 75)
AZ (Ned) 1 (Reijnders 41)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 18 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 0
West Ham United (Eng) 1 (Fornals 90+4)
West Ham United win 3-1 on aggregate

May 18 – Basel
Basel (Sui) 1 (Amdouni 55)
Fiorentina (Ita) 3 (Gonzalez 35, 72, Barak 120+10)
After Extra-Time. Fiorentina win 4-3 on aggregate

2022-23 SPANISH CUP

Final

May 6 – Seville
Real Madrid 2 (Rodrygo 2, 70)
Osasuna 1 (Torro 58)
Real Madrid: Courtois – Carvajal, Militao, Alaba, Camavinga; Valverde, Tchouameni (Rudiger 69), Kroos (Modric 82); Rodrygo (Asensio 89), Benzema, Vinicius Junior.
Osasuna: Herrera – Moncayola, Aridane, D. Garcia, Cruz; Torro (Ibanez 86), Gomez (K. Garcia 86); Pena (R. Garcia 75), Oroz, Ezzalzouli (Barja 75); Budimir (Avila 70).

2022-23 FRENCH CUP

Final

Apr 29 – Saint-Denis
Nantes 1 (Blas 75 pen)
Toulouse 5 (Costa 4, 10, Dallinga 23, 31, Aboukhlal 79)
Nantes: Lafont – Centonze, Castelletto, Pallois (Delort 46), Joao Victor (Merlin 66); Girotto; Blas (Coco 82), Sissoko, Mollet (Moutoussamy 46), Simon (Ganago 46); Mohamed.
Toulouse: Haug – Desler, Costa (Rouault 82), Nicolaisen, Suazo; Spierings (Diarra 82), Van den Boomen; Dejaegere (Sierro 69), Aboukhlal, Chaibi (Rafael Ratao 76); Dallinga (Onaiwu 69).

2022-23 DUTCH CUP

Final

Apr 30 – Rotterdam
Ajax 1 (Branthwaite 32 og)
PSV 1 (Hazard 67)
After Extra-Time
PSV win 3-2 on penalties
Ajax: Rulli – Sanchez (Rensch 46), Timber, Alvarez, Hato (Wijndal 75); Grillitsch (Bassey 68), Klaassen (Vos 116); Berghuis (Conceicao 75), Tadic, Bergwijn (Godts 116); Brobbey.
PSV: Drommel – Teze (Mwene 76), Ramalho, Branthwaite, Van Aanholt; Bakayoko (Hazard 59), Veerman, Sangare, Simons (Gutierrez 98); Til (El Ghazi 59); De Jong (Silva 10).

2022-23 LIECHTENSTEIN CUP

Round of 16

Aug 16: Vaduz III 1-6 Schaan; Ruggell II 1-1 Vaduz II (AET, Vaduz II win 5-4 on penalties); Triesenberg 5-3 Triesen; Eschen/Mauren II 0-9 Balzers
Aug 17: Ruggell 1-4 Eschen/Mauren; Schaan II 3-7 Eschen Mauren III; Triesenberg II 1-4 Balzers II
Aug 31: Triesen II 0-18 Vaduz

Quarter-Finals

Sep 20: Eschen Mauren III 0-8 Vaduz
Oct 11: Balzers II 3-2 Schaan
Oct 12: Vaduz II 0-3 Balzers; Triesenberg 0-1 Eschen/Mauren

Semi-Finals

Mar 15: Balzers II 0-3 Balzers
Apr 5: Eschen/Mauren 1-2 Vaduz (AET)

Final

May 17 – Vaduz
Balzers 0
Vaduz 4 (Gasser 41, Cicek 70 pen, Traber 77, Vayrynen 88)

SOUTH AMERICA

2023 COPA LIBERTADORES

Group Stage

Group A

May 2 – Concepcion
Nublense (Chi) 2 (Rubio 79, Vilches 90+1)
Aucas (Ecu) 1 (Otero 24)

May 4 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 1 (Oroz 73)
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Gabriel Barbosa 45+3)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Racing	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Flamengo	3	1	1	1	4	3	4
Aucas	3	1	0	2	5	6	3
Nublense	3	1	0	2	2	5	3

Group B

May 3 – Porto Alegre
Internacional (Bra) 2 (Mercado 11, De Pena 83)
Nacional (Uru) 2 (Zabala 38, Noguera 90+1)

May 3 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Ecu) 4 (Gruezo 1 og, Cadavid 25, Monsalve 34, Pons 45)
Metropolitanos (Ven) 2 (Londono 15 og, Marchan 90+3)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nacional	3	2	1	0	6	4	7
Internacional	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Ind Medellin	3	1	1	1	6	5	4
Metropolitanos	3	0	0	3	3	7	0

Group C

May 3 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 0
Bolivar (Bol) 4 (Villamil 18, Piris Da Motta 23 og, Bejarano 25, Rodriguez 49)

May 3 – Guayaquil
Barcelona (Ecu) 0
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Veiga 45+3 pen, Gomez 47)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar	3	2	0	1	8	3	6
Palmeiras	3	2	0	1	5	4	6
Barcelona	3	1	0	2	3	5	3
Cerro Porteno	3	1	0	2	3	7	3

Group D

May 2 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 5 (Cano 29, 53, 86, Arias 75, 90+1)
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Beltran 39)

May 2 – Lima
Sporting Cristal (Per) 1 (Lora 80)
The Strongest (Bol) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fluminense	3	3	0	0	9	2	9
The Strongest	3	1	0	2	3	3	3
Sporting Cristal	3	1	0	2	4	7	3
River Plate	3	1	0	2	6	10	3

Group E

May 2 – Montevideo
Liverpool (Uru) 2 (Bentancourt 48, 76)
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 2 (Gonzalez Metilli 45+1, Torren 60 pen)

May 2 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Guedes 35)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 2 (Diaz 22, 52)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Argentinos Juniors	3	2	1	0	4	2	7
Ind del Valle	3	2	0	1	4	2	6
Corinthians	3	1	0	2	4	3	3
Liverpool	3	0	1	2	2	7	1

Group F

May 3 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 0
Boca Juniors (Arg) 2 (Advincula 13, Villa 65)

May 4 – Pereira
Deportivo Pereira (Col) 2 (Ramirez 20 pen, Fory 41)
Monagas (Ven) 1 (Martinez 65)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Boca Juniors	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Dep Pereira	3	1	1	1	4	4	4
Colo-Colo	3	1	1	1	2	3	4
Monagas	3	0	1	2	1	3	1

Group G

May 3 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2 (Gomes 59, 68)
Alianza Lima (Per) 0

May 4 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 1 (Cardozo 10)
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 2 (Romulo 52, Santana 65)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ath Paranaense	3	2	1	0	4	2	7
Alianza Lima	3	1	1	1	2	3	4
Atletico Mineiro	3	1	0	2	3	3	3
Libertad	3	1	0	2	3	4	3

Group H

May 2 – Medellin
Atletico Nacional (Col) 2 (Pabon 26, Devenish 65)
Olimpia (Par) 2 (Cardozo 48, Bruera 78)

May 4 – Parana
Patronato (Arg) 4 (Esquivel 4, 70, Ojeda 59, Levato 86)
Melgar (Per) 1 (Martinez 53)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Nacional	3	2	1	0	7	4	7
Olimpia	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Patronato	3	1	0	2	5	4	3
Melgar	3	0	1	2	3	8	1

- *All Copa Libertadores group standings are correct up to the conclusion of Matchday 3*

2023 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Group Stage

Group A

May 2 – Rancagua
Magallanes (Chi) 2 (Berardo 23, Santibanez 33 og)
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 2 (Ysique 19, Mena 56)

May 4 – Rio de Janiero
Botafogo (Bra) 0
LDU (Ecu) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
LDU	3	2	1	0	6	1	7
Botafogo	3	1	2	0	6	2	5
Magallanes	3	0	2	1	4	8	2
U Cesar Vallejo	3	0	1	2	3	8	1

Group B

May 2 – Buenos Aires
Huracan (Arg) 1 (Novillo 69)
Danubio (Uru) 1 (Haller 24)

May 3 – Asuncion
Guarani (Par) 1 (Santander 63)
Emelec (Ecu) 1 (Cabeza 83)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Huracan	3	1	1	1	5	3	4
Danubio	3	1	1	1	4	3	4
Emelec	3	1	1	1	2	3	4
Guarani	3	1	1	1	4	6	4

Group C

May 2 – Asuncion
Tacuary (Par) 3 (Edson Carius 14, 52, Alfonso 57)
Oriente Petrolero (Bol) 1 (Alvarez 29 pen)

May 2 – Braganca Paulista
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 0
Estudiantes (Arg) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RB Bragantino	3	2	1	0	9	1	7
Estudiantes	3	2	1	0	5	0	7
Tacuary	3	1	0	2	4	9	3
Oriente Petrolero	3	0	0	3	1	9	0

Group D

May 2 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 0
Sao Paulo (Bra) 0

May 3 – Valencia
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 0
Tigre (Arg) 3 (Retegui 24 pen, Menossi 68, Blondel 81)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sao Paulo	3	2	1	0	4	0	7
Tigre	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Tolima	3	1	1	1	3	2	4
Academia PC	3	0	0	3	0	7	0

Group E

May 2 – Rosario
Newell's Old Boys (Arg) 1 (Gomez 84)
Santos (Bra) 0

May 4 – Rancagua
Audax Italiano (Chi) 2 (Sosa 45, Rios 66)
Blooming (Bol) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Newell's Old Boys	3	3	0	0	5	0	9
Audax Italiano	3	1	1	1	2	1	4
Santos	3	1	1	1	1	1	4
Blooming	3	0	0	3	0	6	0

Group F

May 3 – Bogota
Millonarios (Col) 1 (Castro 16)
America Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Azevedo 45+2)

May 4 – Florencio Varela
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 4 (Sant'Anna 39, 45+1, Fernandez 70, Togni 80)
Penarol (Uru) 1 (S. Rodriguez 58)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Millonarios	3	2	1	0	6	1	7
Defensa y Justicia	3	2	0	1	6	5	6
America Mineiro	3	1	1	1	6	4	4
Penarol	3	0	0	3	2	10	0

Group G

May 4 – La Plata
Gimnasia y Esgrima (Arg) 0
Goias (Bra) 2 (Vinicius 55 pen, Matheus Peixoto 82 pen)

May 4 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 2 (Herrera 11, Di Benedetto 66)
Santa Fe (Col) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario	3	2	1	0	5	2	7
Goias	3	1	2	0	4	2	5
Santa Fe	3	1	1	1	2	3	4
Gimnasia y Esgrima	3	0	0	3	1	5	0

Group H

May 3 – Rancagua
Palestino (Chi) 0
San Lorenzo (Arg) 0

May 4 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 6 (Yago Pikachu 29 pen, Ze Welison 43, Thiago Galhardo 72 pen, Calebe 76, Moises 86, Romero 90+1)
Estudiantes de Merida (Ven) 1 (Arenas 45+5)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fortaleza	3	3	0	0	12	1	9
San Lorenzo	3	1	1	1	1	2	4
Palestino	3	1	1	1	1	4	4
Estudiantes de Merida	3	0	0	3	1	8	0

- *All Copa Sudamericana group standings are correct up to the conclusion of Matchday 3*

URUGUAY

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Penarol*	15	10	4	1	25	11	34
Nacional	15	8	5	2	28	11	29
Defensor Sporting	15	6	7	2	27	14	25
Cerro Largo	15	6	7	2	13	10	25
Wanderers	15	6	5	4	16	12	23
Liverpool	15	6	5	4	24	19	20
River Plate	15	5	5	5	17	19	20
Deportivo Maldonado	15	5	5	5	18	23	20
La Luz	15	5	4	6	23	27	18
City Torque	15	3	5	7	15	24	16
Danubio	15	3	6	6	20	19	15
Racing	14	3	6	5	13	16	15
Plaza Colonia	14	4	3	7	14	24	15
Boston River	14	2	5	7	14	22	14
Cerro	14	2	7	5	12	16	13
Fenix	15	3	3	9	11	23	12

**Qualify for the championship play-off*

ASIA

2022 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Final – 1st Leg

Apr 29 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 1 (S. Al Dawsari 13)
Urawa Red Diamonds (Jpn) 1 (Koroki 53)
Al Hilal: Al Mayouf – Abdulhamid, Jang Hyun-soo, Al Bulayhi, Al Burayk (Al Yami 83); Kanno (Otayf 75), Al Faraj, S. Al Dawsari; Marega, Ighalo, Michael.
Sent off: S. Al Dawsari 86.
Urawa Red Diamonds: Nishikawa – Sakai (Ogiwara 81), Scholz, Hoibraten, Akimoto; Ito (Shibato 85), Iwao; Okubo (Hayakawa 81), Koizumi (Yasui 67), Sekine; Koroki (Kante 67).

Final – 2nd Leg

May 6 – Saitama
Urawa Red Diamonds (Jpn) 1 (Carrillo 48 og)
Al Hilal (KSA) 0
Urawa Red Diamonds win 2-1 on aggregate
Urawa Red Diamonds: Nishikawa – Sakai, Scholz, Hoibraten, Akimoto; Ito (Shibato 86), Iwao; Okubo, Koizumi (Yasui 72), Sekine (Ogiwara 86); Koroki (Kante 72).
Al Hilal: Al Mayouf – Abdulhamid, Jang Hyun-soo, Al Bulayhi, Al Burayk (Al Yami 80); Carrillo, Otayf (N. Al Dawsari 68), Kanno (Al Juwayr 87); Michael, Ighalo, Al Hamdan (Al Shehri 68).

BAHRAIN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Khalidiya (C)	22	12	6	4	45	23	42
Manama	22	11	8	3	35	16	41
Muharraq	22	10	10	2	34	12	40
Al Riffa	22	11	6	5	37	19	39
Sitra	22	10	8	4	30	20	38
Al Ahli	22	7	10	5	24	23	31
Al Hidd	22	7	6	9	29	38	27
Al Shabab	22	7	6	9	21	25	27
East Riffa*	22	5	9	8	24	26	24
Al Hala*	22	5	6	11	22	34	21
Bahrain SC (R)	22	4	7	11	22	32	19
Budaiya** (R)	22	1	2	19	10	65	-1

**Enter relegation play-off*
***Deducted 6 points*

HONG KONG

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kitchee (C)	18	15	1	2	76	7	46
Lee Man	18	14	2	2	50	13	44
Rangers	18	10	3	5	41	16	33
Eastern	18	9	4	5	32	13	31
Southern	18	10	1	7	24	25	31
HKFC	18	7	5	6	18	22	26
Tai Po	18	5	5	8	20	27	20
Resources Capital	18	5	3	10	15	34	18
Sham Shui Po	18	2	1	15	4	62	7
HK U23	18	0	1	17	6	67	1

INDONESIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PSM (C)	34	22	9	3	63	28	75
Persija	34	20	6	8	47	27	66
Persib	34	19	5	10	54	50	62
Borneo Samarinda	34	16	9	9	64	40	57
Bali United	34	16	6	12	67	53	54
Persebaya	34	15	7	12	52	45	52
Bhayangkara	34	15	6	13	53	44	51
Madura Utd	34	14	9	11	39	36	51
Persita	34	13	8	13	43	46	47
Persis	34	11	11	12	50	47	44
Persik	34	12	8	14	42	43	44
Arema	34	12	6	16	32	40	42
PSIS	34	12	5	17	44	53	41
Persikabo 1973	34	11	8	15	43	48	41
Barito Putera	34	10	8	16	44	55	38
PSS (R)	34	10	4	20	34	57	34
Dewa Utd (R)	34	8	9	17	34	53	33
RANS Nusantara (R)	34	3	10	21	40	80	19

IRAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Persepolis (C)	30	20	6	4	46	13	66
Sepahan	30	19	8	3	49	17	65
Esteghlal	30	18	8	4	52	22	62
Tractor	30	15	7	8	42	34	52
Mes Rafsanjan	30	11	14	5	29	15	47
Gol Gohar	30	12	9	9	40	36	45
Aluminium Arak	30	8	16	6	20	15	40
Foolad	30	9	13	8	27	26	40
Zob Ahan	30	7	15	8	25	24	36
Havadar	30	7	12	11	24	34	33
Paykan	30	5	13	12	12	28	28
Malavan	30	5	12	13	21	40	27
Nassaji Mazandaran	30	5	11	14	26	44	26
Sanat Naft	30	5	10	15	22	36	25
Mes Kerman (R)	30	4	10	16	23	37	22
Naft Masjed Soleyman (R)	30	4	8	18	22	59	20

QATAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Duhail (C)	22	16	3	3	50	26	51
Al Arabi	22	16	1	5	43	23	49
Al Sadd	22	14	2	6	46	26	44
Al Wakrah	22	11	6	5	44	24	39
Qatar SC	22	11	3	8	28	30	36
Al Gharafa	22	9	5	8	32	38	32
Al Markhiya	22	7	3	12	30	37	24
Al Ahli	22	6	6	10	32	45	24
Al Rayyan	22	5	5	12	29	33	20
Umm Salal	22	3	9	10	18	34	18
Al Shamal*	22	5	3	14	22	41	18
Al Saliyia (R)	22	4	4	14	28	45	16

**Enter relegation play-off*

THAILAND

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Buriram United (C)	30	23	5	2	75	27	74
Bangkok United	30	19	5	6	55	22	62
Port	30	14	10	6	52	38	52
Muangthong United	30	14	8	8	56	37	50
Chiangrai United	30	12	8	10	44	42	44
Chonburi	30	13	4	13	46	38	43
Police Tero	30	11	10	9	41	43	43
BG Pathum United	30	12	5	13	42	39	41
Ratchaburi	30	10	11	9	32	29	41
Lamphun Warriors	30	9	9	12	27	36	36
Prachuap	30	9	8	13	44	51	35
Sukhothai	30	8	10	12	27	43	34
Khonkaen United	30	7	12	11	24	42	33
Nakhonratchasima (R)	30	7	8	15	31	53	29
Nongbua Pitchaya (R)	30	5	6	19	27	47	21
Lampang (R)	30	4	7	19	24	60	19

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shabab Al Ahli (C)	26	17	6	3	53	25	57
Al Ain	26	16	6	4	67	31	54
Al Wahda	26	15	7	4	48	26	52
Al Wasl	26	13	8	5	53	32	47
Al Jazira	26	14	4	8	50	39	46
Ajman	26	13	5	8	41	38	44
Sharjah	26	12	7	7	42	21	43
Kalba	26	9	6	11	32	41	33
Al Nasr	26	7	6	13	27	43	27
Khor Fakkan	26	6	7	13	28	44	25
Baniyas	26	6	6	14	34	46	24
Al Bataeh	26	5	6	15	30	57	21
Dibba Al Fujairah (R)	26	5	5	16	20	44	20
Al Dhafra (R)	26	3	3	20	26	64	12

CONCACAF

2023 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 25 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 2 (Cordova 45, Quinones 45+3)
Leon (Mex) 1 (Davila 6)

Apr 26 – Chester
Philadelphia Union (USA) 1 (Gazdag 86 pen)
LAFC (USA) 1 (Acosta 90+1)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 2 – Los Angeles
LAFC (USA) 3 (Tillman 13, Opoku 82, Bouanga 90)
Philadelphia Union (USA) 0
LAFC win 4-1 on aggregate

May 3 – Leon
Leon (Mex) 3 (Ambriz 10, Mena 15, Frias 79)
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Fulgencio 68)
Leon win 4-3 on aggregate

ANTIGUA & BARBUDA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Grenades (C)	18	16	0	2	67	14	48
All Saints United	18	15	1	2	64	16	46
Aston Villa	18	12	1	5	46	24	37
Old Road	18	9	7	2	44	24	34
SAP	18	9	2	7	54	44	29
Swetes	18	8	4	6	29	34	28
Hoppers	18	7	4	7	29	32	25
Ottos Rangers	18	8	1	9	30	40	25
Tryum	18	8	1	9	27	37	25
Willikies	18	7	3	8	32	29	24
Empire	18	7	3	8	42	42	24
Parham	18	7	3	8	32	36	24
Pigotts Bullets	18	6	5	7	21	26	23
Blue Jays*	18	3	1	14	18	48	10
Five Islands (R)	18	0	3	15	15	59	3
Liberta** (R)	18	1	3	14	22	67	0

**Enter relegation play-off*
***Deducted 6 points*

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
One Love Utd (C)	19	16	1	2	81	19	49
Sugar Boys	19	14	3	2	59	26	45
Wolues	19	12	5	2	81	29	41
VG Utd	19	11	4	4	71	27	37
Rebels	19	11	2	6	84	34	35
Lion Heart	19	9	2	8	45	32	29
Panthers	19	7	1	11	54	55	22
Islanders	19	7	0	12	30	38	21
Old Madrid	19	2	0	17	18	112	6
Positive	19	1	0	18	19	158	3
One Caribbean	10	1	0	9	19	31	3

GUADELOUPE

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Moulien	16	12	2	2	40	11	54
La Gauloise	16	12	2	2	37	8	54
Jeunesse Evolution	16	8	3	5	20	17	43
Gosier	16	8	2	6	26	27	42
Sporting Baie-Mahault	16	7	2	7	19	26	39
CERFA	16	5	2	9	20	26	33
Red Star*	16	4	2	10	14	27	29
Vieux-Habitants	16	3	4	9	17	26	29
Capesterre Bell	16	2	3	11	10	35	25

**Deducted 1 point*

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Solidarite Scolaire	16	10	5	1	39	18	51
Etoile de Morne-a-l'Eau	16	9	4	3	29	17	47
Phare du Canal	16	7	6	3	26	16	43
USBM	16	8	3	5	24	19	43
Siroco Les Abymes	16	6	3	7	24	26	37
Dynamo Le Moule	16	6	2	8	29	30	36
Juventus Saint-Anne	16	4	4	8	26	34	32
Gourbeyre	16	4	1	11	17	39	29
Stade Lamentinois	16	3	2	11	17	32	27

- *Teams get 4 points for a win, 2 points for a draw and 1 point for a defeat. The top four teams in each group qualify for the championship round, with the bottom five teams in each group qualifying for the relegation round*

MARTINIQUE

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Golden Lion (C)	10	7	2	1	19	9	33
Club Franciscain	10	6	1	3	19	9	29
Club Colonial	10	5	2	3	21	15	27
Samaritaine	10	4	1	5	14	16	23
Aiglon	10	2	2	6	13	16	18
Diamantinoise	10	1	2	7	9	30	15

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
New Club	18	11	3	4	39	26	54
RC Saint Joseph	18	11	2	5	40	19	53
Case-Pilote	18	9	4	5	33	25	49
Club Peleen	18	9	4	5	30	23	49
Golden Star	18	8	6	4	33	16	48
Assaut	18	9	2	7	27	19	47
Vert-Pre	18	7	4	7	22	21	43
US Robert	18	5	4	9	16	24	37
Trenelle (R)	18	3	3	12	13	32	30
Good Luck (R)	18	1	2	14	17	65	22

NICARAGUA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Diriangen*	18	12	3	3	36	19	39
Real Esteli*	18	10	5	3	37	19	35
Managua**	18	8	5	5	26	23	29
Walter Ferretti**	18	7	5	6	26	24	26
Matagalpa**	18	7	4	7	19	19	25
Deportivo Ocotal**	18	7	3	8	24	24	24
UNAN Managua	18	5	5	8	24	25	20
Municipal Jalapa	18	5	4	9	21	30	19
Sport Sebaco	18	5	4	9	21	32	19
Juventus Managua	18	3	4	11	19	38	13

**Qualify for the finals stage semi-finals*

***Qualify for finals stage preliminary play-offs*

Finals Stage

Preliminary Play-Offs

Apr 27-28: Managua 3-1 Deportivo Ocotal; Walter Ferretti 1-1 Matagalpa (Matagalpa win 9-8 on penalties)

Semi-Finals

Apr 30-May 1: Matagalpa 0-2 Diriangen;
Managua 0-1 Real Esteli

May 7-8: Diriangen 3-0 Matagalpa (agg 5-0);
Real Esteli 2-3 Managua (agg 3-3,
Real Esteli win 4-3 on penalties)

Final

May 15: Real Esteli 0-0 Diriangen
May 21: Diriangen 0-3 Real Esteli (agg 0-3)

AFRICA

2022-23 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 21 – Algiers
JS Kabylie (Alg) 0
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Ben Hammouda 54)

Apr 22 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 2 (Abdelmonem 45+2, Fathy 84)
Raja (Mar) 0

Apr 22 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Rebiai 45+3)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 4 (Shalulile 6, 51, Maema 20, Mailula 90+2)

Apr 22 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 1 (Othos 30)
Wydad (Mar) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 28 – Casablanca
Wydad (Mar) 1 (Sambou 24)
Simba (Tan) 0
1-1 on aggregate. Wydad win 4-3 on penalties

Apr 29 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Ben Romdhane 49)
JS Kabylie (Alg) 1 (Redjem 85)
Esperance win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 29 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Zwane 45, Morena 49)
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Bouchar 24)
Mamelodi Sundowns win 6-2 on aggregate

Apr 29 – Casablanca
Raja (Mar) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 0
Al Ahly win 2-0 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

May 12 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 3 (Tau 8, 55, Kahraba 75)

May 13 – Casablanca
Wydad (Mar) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 19 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (El Shahat 22)
Esperance (Tun) 0
Al Ahly win 4-0 on aggregate

May 20 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Zwane 50, Shalulile 79)
Wydad (Mar) 2 (El Amloud 72, Mvala 83 og)
2-2 on aggregate. Wydad win on away goals

2022-23 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 23 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 1 (Sobhi 90+2 pen)
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 1 (Chivaviro 55)

Apr 23 – Uyo
Rivers United (Nga) 0
Young Africans (Tan) 2 (Mayele 73, 81)

Apr 23 – Tunis
US Monastir (Tun) 0
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 0

Apr 23 – Algiers
USM Alger (Alg) 2 (Radouani 44, Belaid 62)
ASFAR (Mar) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 30 – Bouake
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 2 (Zouzou 45+1, Zouzoua 90+1)
US Monastir (Tun) 0
ASEC Abidjan win 2-0 on aggregate

Apr 30 – Rabat
ASFAR (Mar) 3 (Chita 8 og, Diney 60, Hrimat 90+7 pen)
USM Alger (Alg) 2 (Radouani 12, Bousseliou 78)
USM Alger win 4-3 on aggregate

Apr 30 –Johannesburg
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 1 (Ngema 39)
Pyramids (Egy) 0
Marumo Gallants win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 30 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 0
Rivers United (Nga) 0
Young Africans win 2-0 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

May 10 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 2 (Aziz Ki 64, Morrison 90+2)
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 0

May 10 – Bouake
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 0
USM Alger (Alg) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 17 – Rustenburg
Marumo Gallants (RSA) 1 (Chivaviro 90+1)
Young Africans (Tan) 2 (Mayele 45+1, Musonda 62)
Young Africans win 4-1 on aggregate

May 17 – Algiers
USM Alger (Alg) 2 (Bousseliou 28, Belkacemi 80)
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 0
USM Alger win 2-0 on aggregate

BURKINA FASO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Douanes (C)	30	19	10	1	49	18	67
Salitas	30	18	7	5	45	24	61
Vitesse	30	14	8	8	35	28	50
Rahimo	30	13	9	8	31	23	48
RC Bobo-Dioulasso	30	11	13	6	38	26	46
Majestic	30	10	9	11	36	28	39
RCK	30	8	14	8	18	23	38
USFA	30	9	9	12	24	26	36
ASFA-Yennenga	30	8	12	10	20	22	36
EF Ouagadougou	30	9	9	12	24	28	36
ASFB	30	7	14	9	20	25	35
SONABEL	30	7	14	9	17	25	35
ASEC-K	30	8	11	11	20	36	35
Royal	30	7	12	11	25	29	33
Real du Faso (R)	30	5	12	13	15	24	27
Police (R)	30	1	9	20	11	43	12

BURUNDI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bumamuru (C)	30	20	8	2	71	21	68
Flambeau du Centre	30	20	7	3	55	27	67
Le Messager Ngozi	30	16	8	6	44	19	56
Vital'O	30	15	9	6	42	30	54
Aigle Noir	30	14	11	5	34	24	53
Rukinzo	30	11	9	10	29	32	42
Kayanza United	30	11	7	12	34	39	40
Musongati	30	8	13	9	33	35	37
Olympic Star	30	10	7	13	30	35	37
Tigre Noir	30	8	10	12	34	34	34
Magara Young Boys	30	9	7	14	38	50	34
Athletico New Oil	30	8	6	16	30	48	30
Inter Star	30	7	8	15	25	47	29
Bujumbura City (R)	30	6	9	15	30	43	27
Dynamik (R)	30	6	8	16	19	41	26
Top Junior (R)	30	4	7	19	16	39	19

CAMEROON

Regular Season Pool A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Canon Yaounde	20	10	8	2	31	14	38
Coton Sport	20	10	6	4	21	13	36
UMS de Loum**	20	10	4	6	21	21	34
PWD Bamenda	20	7	4	9	18	18	25
Avion Academy**	20	7	4	9	23	28	25
Aigle Royal	20	6	6	8	16	22	24
Stade Renard	20	6	6	8	15	17	24
Colombe Sportive	20	5	8	7	17	19	23
Eding Sport* (R)	20	5	8	7	12	15	23
Djiko (R)	20	5	8	7	20	21	23
Renaissance (R)	20	6	4	10	18	24	22

**Enter the relegation play-off*

***Avion Academy were awarded a 3-0 win over UMS de Loum, thus avoiding relegation*

Regular Season Pool B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gazelle	20	10	5	5	27	18	35
Bamboutos	20	9	7	4	21	12	34
APEJES Mfou	20	10	4	6	32	24	34
Fovu Club	20	9	4	7	24	19	31
Les Astres	20	7	6	7	23	29	27
Union Douala	20	6	9	5	18	17	27
Fauve Azur Elite	20	7	6	7	23	23	27
AS Fortuna Mfou	20	6	8	6	25	29	26
YOSA*	20	6	6	8	20	21	24
Yafoot (R)	20	6	4	10	24	30	22
Dragon de Yaounde (R)	20	1	7	12	19	34	10

**Enter the relegation play-off*

- *The top two teams from each regular season pool qualify for the championship round*

Relegation Play-Off

May 19: Eding Sport 0-2 YOSA

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cotonsport (C)	3	3	0	0	4	0	9
Bamboutos	3	2	0	1	6	3	6
Canon Yaounde	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
Gazelle	3	0	0	3	1	7	0

ESWATINI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Green Mamba (C)	26	20	1	5	50	22	61
Young Buffaloes	26	16	10	0	49	18	58
Mbabane Swallows	26	16	6	4	53	19	54
Highlanders	26	15	6	5	33	17	51
Royal Leopards	26	11	6	9	37	28	39
Nsingizini Hotspurs	26	10	8	8	32	24	38
Moneni Pirates	26	9	7	10	21	28	34
Denver	26	8	8	10	28	25	32
Manzini Sea Birds	26	6	10	10	36	39	28
Manzini Wanderers	26	8	3	15	22	42	27
Madlenya (R)	26	7	4	15	28	36	25
Tambuti (R)	26	6	5	15	22	43	23
Seven Dreams (R)	26	2	9	15	13	54	15
Tambankulu Callies (R)	26	2	9	15	13	42	15

LESOTHO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bantu (C)	30	21	5	4	57	13	68
Linare	30	19	6	5	48	16	63
LDF	30	19	5	6	47	23	62
LMPS	30	17	7	6	40	17	58
LCS	30	16	8	6	56	19	56
Matlama	30	17	5	8	48	27	56
Lijabatho	30	13	10	7	32	17	49
Lioli	30	11	9	10	31	28	42
Liphakoe	30	11	7	12	33	39	40
Machokha	30	10	6	14	30	51	36
Manonyane	30	8	10	12	26	33	34
Lifofane	30	7	10	13	24	34	31
CCX	30	5	6	19	19	53	21
Naughty Boys (R)	30	6	3	21	19	74	21
Mazenod Swallows (R)	30	3	7	20	19	53	16
Galaxy (R)	30	2	6	22	15	47	12

LIBERIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
LISCR (C)	26	19	5	2	61	22	62
Bea Mountain	26	16	10	0	56	12	58
Watanga	26	14	7	5	55	27	49
Mighty Barrolle	26	10	9	7	53	34	39
Heaven Eleven	26	10	9	7	45	40	39
Nimba Kwado	26	9	10	7	28	22	37
Muscat	26	10	4	12	37	50	34
LPRC Oilers	26	9	6	11	44	49	33
Cece Utd	26	7	9	10	39	39	30
Invincible Eleven	26	8	5	13	29	48	29
Freeport	26	7	5	14	32	42	26
Jubilee (R)	26	6	8	12	34	47	26
Nimba Utd (R)	26	3	9	14	16	53	18
Sandi (R)	26	6	0	20	28	72	18

MAURITIUS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
GRSE Wanderers (C)	18	13	3	2	31	9	42
Pamplemousses	18	12	4	2	26	8	40
ASPL 2000	18	12	3	3	37	12	39
Cercle de Joachim	18	9	3	6	25	15	30
ASVP	18	7	6	5	21	17	27
Petite Riviere Noire	18	6	3	9	25	30	21
Entente Boulet Rouge	18	6	0	12	26	34	18
Savanne	18	4	4	10	13	34	16
La Cure Sylvester (R)	18	4	2	12	14	37	14
Bolton City (R)	18	1	4	13	6	28	7

SOUTH AFRICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi Sundowns (C)	30	21	7	2	52	13	70
Orlando Pirates	30	16	6	8	40	21	54
SuperSport United	30	14	9	7	34	22	51
Cape Town City	30	12	9	9	34	30	45
Kaizer Chiefs	30	13	5	12	32	33	44
Stellenbosch	30	10	10	10	39	38	40
Sekhukhune United	30	10	10	10	24	27	40
Swallows	30	11	7	12	26	33	40
Golden Arrows	30	10	8	12	32	40	38
TS Galaxy	30	7	14	9	28	22	35
Royal AM	30	9	8	13	33	43	35
AmaZulu	30	7	12	11	29	33	33
Richards Bay	30	8	9	13	20	30	33
Chippa United	30	7	9	14	29	44	30
Maritzburg United*	30	7	9	14	24	40	30
Marumo Gallants (R)	30	5	14	11	27	34	29

**Enter the relegation play-off*

Internationals

EURO 2024 QUALIFIERS

Matchdays 3-4

Group A

Jun 17: Norway v Scotland;
Cyprus v Georgia
Jun 20: Norway v Cyprus;
Scotland v Georgia

Group B

Jun 16: Gibraltar v France;
Greece v Republic of Ireland
Jun 19: France v Greece;
Republic of Ireland v Gibraltar

Group C

Jun 16: Malta v England;
North Macedonia v Ukraine
Jun 19: England v North Macedonia;
Ukraine v Malta

Group D

Jun 16: Latvia v Turkey;
Wales v Armenia
Jun 19: Armenia v Latvia;
Turkey v Wales

Group E

Jun 17: Albania v Moldova;
Faroe Islands v Czech Republic
Jun 20: Faroe Islands v Albania;
Moldova v Poland

Group F

Jun 17: Azerbaijan v Estonia;
Belgium v Austria
Jun 20: Austria v Sweden;
Estonia v Belgium

Group G

Jun 17: Lithuania v Bulgaria;
Montenegro v Hungary
Jun 20: Bulgaria v Serbia;
Hungary v Lithuania

Group H

Jun 16: Finland v Slovenia;
Denmark v Northern Ireland;
San Marino v Kazakhstan
Jun 19: Finland v San Marino;
Northern Ireland v Kazakhstan;
Slovenia v Denmark

Group I

Jun 16: Andorra v Switzerland;
Belarus v Israel;
Kosovo v Romania
Jun 19: Belarus v Kosovo;
Israel v Andorra;
Switzerland v Romania

Group J

Jun 17: Iceland v Slovakia;
Luxembourg v Liechtenstein;
Portugal v Bosnia & Herzegovina
Jun 20: Iceland v Portugal;
Bosnia & Herzegovina v Luxembourg;
Liechtenstein v Slovenia

2022-23 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Finals

Semi-Finals

Jun 14: Netherlands v Croatia
Jun 15: Spain v Italy

- *Third place play-off and final take place June 18*

2022-23 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

Finals

Semi-Finals

Jun 15: Panama v Canada;
United States v Mexico

- *Third place play-off and final take place June 18*

AFCON 2023 QUALIFIERS

Matchday 5

Group A

Jun 12-20: Sierra Leone v Nigeria;
Sao Tome & Principe v Guinea-Bissau

Group B

Jun 12-20: Cape Verde v Burkina Faso;
Eswatini v Togo

Group C

Jun 12-20: Burundi v Namibia

Group D

Jun 12-20: Guinea v Egypt; Ethiopia v Malawi

Group E

Jun 12-20: Madagascar v Ghana;
Central African Republic v Angola

Group F

Jun 12-20: Uganda v Algeria; Tanzania v Niger

Group G

Jun 12-20: Congo v Mali; South Sudan v Gambia

Group H

Jun 12-20: Zambia v Ivory Coast;
Lesotho v Comoros

Group I

Jun 12-20: Gabon v DR Congo;
Sudan v Mauritania

Group J

Jun 12-20: Equatorial Guinea v Tunisia;
Botswana v Libya

Group K

Jun 12-20: South Africa v Morocco

Group L

Jun 12-20: Benin v Senegal;
Rwanda v Mozambique

2023 CAFA CHAMPIONSHIP

Group Stage

Group A

Jun 11: Uzbekistan v Oman;
Tajikistan v Turkmenistan
Jun 14: Oman v Tajikistan;
Turkmenistan v Uzbekistan
Jun 17: Uzbekistan v Tajikistan;
Turkmenistan v Oman

Group B
Jun 10: Kyrgyzstan v Afghanistan
Jun 13: Iran v Afghanistan
Jun 16: Kyrgyzstan v Iran

- *Third place match and final take place June 20*

2023 SOUTHEAST ASIAN GAMES

Group A

Apr 29: Indonesia 3-0 Philippines;
Cambodia 4-0 Timor-Leste
May 2: Myanmar 1-0 Timor-Leste;
Philippines 1-1 Cambodia
May 4: Indonesia 5-0 Myanmar;
Timor-Leste 3-0 Philippines
May 7: Timor-Leste 0-3 Indonesia;
Myanmar 2-0 Cambodia
May 10: Philippines 0-1 Myanmar;
Cambodia 1-2 Indonesia

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Indonesia (Q)	4	4	0	0	13	1	12
Myanmar (Q)	4	3	0	1	4	5	9
Cambodia	4	1	1	2	6	5	4
Timor-Leste	4	1	0	3	3	8	3
Philippines	4	0	1	3	1	8	1

Group B

Apr 30: Thailand 3-1 Singapore;
Vietnam 2-0 Laos
May 3: Singapore 1-3 Vietnam; Malaysia 5-1 Laos
May 6: Thailand 2-0 Malaysia;
Laos 0-0 Singapore
May 8: Laos 1-4 Thailand; Malaysia 1-2 Vietnam
May 11: Singapore 0-7 Malaysia;
Vietnam 1-1 Thailand

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Thailand (Q)	4	3	1	0	10	3	10
Vietnam (Q)	4	3	1	0	8	3	10
Malaysia	4	2	0	2	13	5	6
Laos	4	0	1	3	2	11	1
Singapore	4	0	1	3	2	13	1

Semi-Finals

May 13 – Phnom Penh
Indonesia 3 (Komang 10, Ferarri 53, Taufany 90+6)
Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Van Tung 36, Bagas 79 og)

May 13 – Phnom Penh
Thailand 3 (Teerasak 37, James 85, Anan 90+7)
Myanmar 0

Bronze Medal Match

May 16 – Phnom Penh
Vietnam 3 (Ho Van Cuong 8, 34,
Khuat Van Khang 56)
Myanmar 1 (Aung Myo Khant 88)

Gold Medal Match

May 16 – Phnom Penh
Indonesia 5 (Sananta 20, 45+5, Irfan 91,
Fajar 107, Beckham 120)
Thailand 2 (Anan 65, Yotsakorn 90+9)
After Extra-Time

FRIENDLIES

Apr 19 – Glendale
United States 1 (Ferreira 81)
Mexico 1 (Antuna 55)

2023 ASIAN CUP

Group Stage Draw

Group A
Qatar, China, Tajikistan, Lebanon

Group B
Australia, Uzbekistan, Syria, India

Group C
Iran, United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, Palestine

Group D
Japan, Indonesia, Iraq, Vietnam

Group E
South Korea, Malaysia, Jordan, Bahrain

Group F
Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Krygyzstan, Oman

- *2023 Asian Cup takes place in Qatar, from January 12 to February 10, 2024*

July 2023 *Vol. 63 No. 11*

GROUP EDITOR
Stephen Fishlock

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Jamie Evans & Jared Tinslay

DESIGN
Sean Phillips, atg-media.com

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Kelsey Media, The Granary, Downs Court,
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ADVERTISING AND SPONSORSHIP
Talk Media Ltd: Russell Bedford
Tel. 01732 445328
Email: russell@talk-media.uk

AD PRODUCTION MANAGER
Talk Media Ltd: Nick Bond
Tel. 01732 445325
Email: nick@talk-media.uk

PUBLISHER Steve Brown
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER Phil Weeden
MANAGING DIRECTOR Kevin McCormick
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CONSUMER ADVERTISING Oswin Grady
OPERATIONS DIRECTOR Gill Lambert
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Hayley Brown & Kelly Orriss

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WorldSoccer

MY BIGGEST GAME

Shaka Hislop

Trinidad & Tobago 0 Sweden 0

2006 World Cup, Dortmund

In Trinidad & Tobago's first-ever World Cup match, their legendary goalkeeper was thrown in at the deep end...

Pride...Hislop celebrates the draw

“Trinidad and Tobago had come close to qualifying for the World Cup twice before, only to fall at the final hurdle. I knew how much that hurt and how much this opportunity meant. To finally get there, and make our debut against Sweden, was the stuff that dreams are made of.

I wasn't even supposed to start. Kelvin Jack had been first-choice goalkeeper under Leo Beenhakker, but he'd picked up an injury. He was struggling and felt he couldn't do himself justice. About ten or 15 minutes before kick-off, Leo motioned for me to come over and asked if I was ready.

I was thrown in at the deep end, but I think that was for the best. Because I wasn't meant to play, I was quite relaxed, and I'd had far too big a breakfast that morning! I didn't have any of the sleepless nights or pre-match nerves that come with games of that magnitude. It was daunting enough for myself and Dwight Yorke, so I could imagine what it was like for others who hadn't played at that level.

A lot of the talk going into the tournament had been about how heavily the other teams in our group – England, Sweden and Paraguay – were going to beat us. That was the view around the world, but I remember saying that we had a surprise up our sleeves, and so it proved.

I'll never forget standing on that pitch in Dortmund and hearing our national anthem play before a World Cup match. I never thought that would happen as a fan, let alone a player. It was surreal. Then, once that whistle goes, the game takes care of itself.

I didn't get to go through my full warm-up routine and practise crosses, so I decided to come for the first one regardless and use that to judge how the ball was flying. Sweden got a corner early on, which they put to the far post, and I managed to just get a fingertip to it.

About half an hour into the game, they got another corner. Olof Mellberg came up into the box shouting angrily at Henrik Larsson and Zlatan Ibrahimovic because Sweden were having all the possession but it was still 0-0. I thought: “We're getting under their skin here.” That was when I really felt that we'd get something out of the game. I didn't anticipate us having Avery John sent off just after half-time, but even then I still believed.

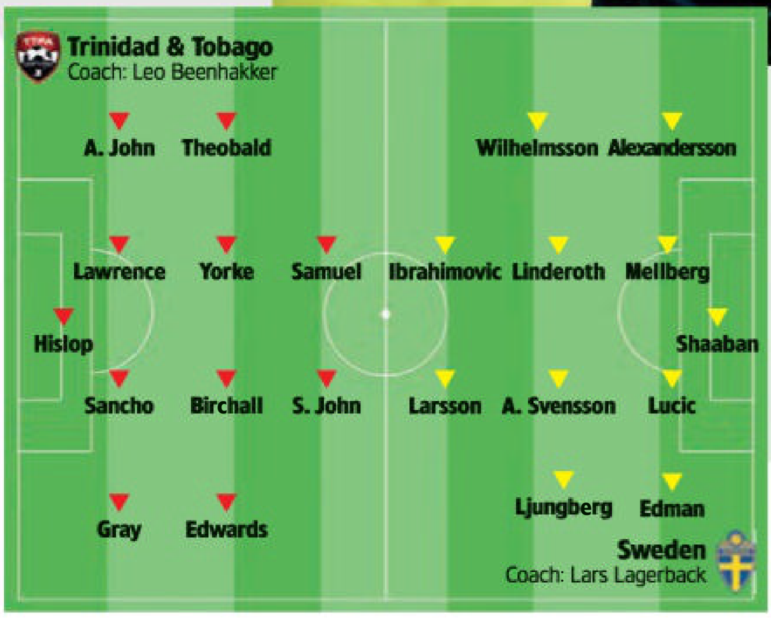
Beenhakker was the best coach I had in terms of communicating his ideas, reading people and knowing exactly what was needed at the right time. When we were down to ten men, he surprised everyone by bringing a striker on. Cornell Glen was pacy and we knew that there'd be space in behind as Sweden pushed higher. He had a shot that just clipped the crossbar. If it had been six inches lower, then the fairy tale could have been even better.

Although most of the crowd were wearing yellow and supporting Sweden, towards the end of the game, all you could hear was fans chanting: “Trinidad and Tobago”. That sent shivers up my spine. People had started to support us and recognise our underdog story.

I've never gone back and watched the game. I've avoided the highlights as best I can because it was my own personal fairy tale and I want it to remain that way. I look back on that day, and the whole World Cup campaign, with immense pride. We took calypso music, our culture, and who we are as people to football's biggest stage and showcased it really well, on and off the pitch.”

Interview by Sean Cole

> “I was thrown in at the deep end, but I think that was for the best”



Shot stopper...Anders Svensson sees an effort saved by Hislop

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE JULY 7

WorldSoccer

NEXT MONTH

THE COMPLETE RECORD...

2022-23 season review

- ANALYSIS ON EUROPE'S TOP LEAGUES
- CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL REVIEW
- EUROPA LEAGUE & CONFERENCE LEAGUE

ON SALE JULY 7

★ AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND 2023 ★ JULY 20-AUGUST 20 ★ AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

GROUP A

JULY 20 ★ 8AM ★ AUCKLAND			
NEW ZEALAND			**NORWAY**
JULY 21 ★ 6AM ★ DUNEDIN			
PHILIPPINES			**SWITZERLAND**
JULY 25 ★ 6.30AM ★ WELLINGTON			
NEW ZEALAND			**PHILIPPINES**
JULY 25 ★ 9AM ★ HAMILTON			
SWITZERLAND			**NORWAY**
JULY 30 ★ 8AM ★ AUCKLAND			
NORWAY			**PHILIPPINES**
JULY 30 ★ 8AM ★ DUNEDIN			
SWITZERLAND			**NEW ZEALAND**

FINAL TABLE

		P	GD	PTS
1				
2				
3				
4				

GROUP C

JULY 21 ★ 8.30AM ★ WELLINGTON			
SPAIN			**COSTA RICA**
JULY 22 ★ 8AM ★ HAMILTON			
ZAMBIA			**JAPAN**
JULY 26 ★ 6AM ★ DUNEDIN			
JAPAN			**COSTA RICA**
JULY 26 ★ 8.30AM ★ AUCKLAND			
SPAIN			**ZAMBIA**
JULY 31 ★ 8AM ★ HAMILTON			
COSTA RICA			**ZAMBIA**
JULY 31 ★ 8AM ★ WELLINGTON			
JAPAN			**SPAIN**

FINAL TABLE

		P	GD	PTS
1				
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4				

GROUP B

JULY 20 ★ 11AM ★ SYDNEY			
AUSTRALIA			**REP. OF IRELAND**
JULY 21 ★ 3.30AM ★ MELBOURNE			
NIGERIA			**CANADA**
JULY 26 ★ 1PM ★ PERTH			
CANADA			**REP. OF IRELAND**
JULY 27 ★ 11AM ★ BRISBANE			
AUSTRALIA			**NIGERIA**
JULY 31 ★ 11AM ★ MELBOURNE			
CANADA			**AUSTRALIA**
JULY 31 ★ 11AM ★ BRISBANE			
REP. OF IRELAND			**NIGERIA**

FINAL TABLE

		P	GD	PTS
1				
2				
3				
4				

GROUP D

JULY 22 ★ 10.30AM ★ BRISBANE			
ENGLAND			**HAITI**
JULY 22 ★ 1PM ★ PERTH			
DENMARK			**CHINA**
JULY 28 ★ 9.30AM ★ SYDNEY			
ENGLAND			**DENMARK**
JULY 28 ★ 12PM ★ ADELAIDE			
CHINA			**HAITI**
AUGUST 1 ★ 12PM ★ ADELAIDE			
CHINA			**ENGLAND**
AUGUST 1 ★ 12PM ★ PERTH			
HAITI			**DENMARK**

FINAL TABLE

		P	GD	PTS
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2023 WOME

LAST 16 GAME 49

AUGUST 5 ★ 6AM ★ AUCKLAND

WINNERS GROUP A | | | RUNNERS-UP GROUP C

LAST 16 GAME 50

AUGUST 5 ★ 9AM ★ WELLINGTON

WINNERS GROUP C | | | RUNNERS-UP GROUP A

LAST 16 GAME 51

AUGUST 6 ★ 3AM ★ SYDNEY

WINNERS GROUP E | | | RUNNERS-UP GROUP G

LAST 16 GAME 52

AUGUST 6 ★ 10AM ★ MELBOURNE

WINNERS GROUP G | | | RUNNERS-UP GROUP E

QUARTER-FINAL GAME 57

AUGUST 11 ★ 2AM ★ WELLINGTON

WINNERS GAME 49 | | | WINNERS GAME 51

QUARTER-FINAL GAME 58

AUGUST 11 ★ 8.30AM ★ AUCKLAND

WINNERS GAME 50 | | | WINNERS GAME 52

SEMI-FINAL GAME 61

AUGUST 15 ★ 9AM ★ AUCKLAND

WINNERS GAME 57 | | | WINNERS GAME 58

THIRD PLACE P

AUGUST 19 ★9A

LOSERS GAME 61

THE FINA

AUGUST 20 ★ 11

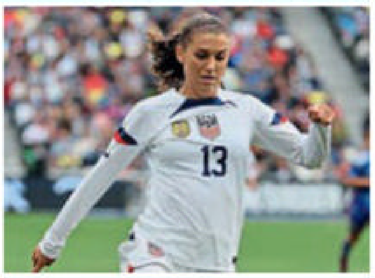
WINNERS GAME 61

★ AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND 2023 ★ JULY 20-AUGUST 20 ★ AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

2023 ★ JULY 20-AUGUST 20 ★ AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND 2023 ★ JULY 20-AUGUST 20 ★

GROUP E

JULY 22 ★ 2AM ★ AUCKLAND			
UNITED STATES			**VIETNAM**
JULY 23 ★ 8.30AM ★ DUNEDIN			
NETHERLANDS			**PORTUGAL**
JULY 27 ★ 2AM ★ WELLINGTON			
UNITED STATES			**NETHERLANDS**
JULY 27 ★ 8.30AM ★ HAMILTON			
PORTUGAL			**VIETNAM**
AUGUST 1 ★ 8AM ★ AUCKLAND			
PORTUGAL			**UNITED STATES**
AUGUST 1 ★ 8AM ★ DUNEDIN			
VIETNAM			**NETHERLANDS**



FINAL TABLE

		P	GD	PTS
1				
2				
3				
4				

GROUP G

JULY 23 ★ 6AM ★ WELLINGTON			
SWEDEN			**SOUTH AFRICA**
JULY 24 ★ 7AM ★ AUCKLAND			
ITALY			**ARGENTINA**
JULY 28 ★ 1AM ★ DUNEDIN			
ARGENTINA			**SOUTH AFRICA**
JULY 29 ★ 8.30AM ★ WELLINGTON			
SWEDEN			**ITALY**
AUGUST 2 ★ 8AM ★ HAMILTON			
ARGENTINA			**SWEDEN**
AUGUST 2 ★ 8AM ★ WELLINGTON			
SOUTH AFRICA			**ITALY**

FINAL TABLE

		P	GD	PTS
1				
2				
3				
4				

GROUP F

JULY 23 ★ 11AM ★ SYDNEY			
FRANCE			**JAMAICA**
JULY 24 ★ 12PM ★ ADELAIDE			
BRAZIL			**PANAMA**
JULY 29 ★ 11AM ★ BRISBANE			
FRANCE			**BRAZIL**
JULY 29 ★ 1.30PM ★ PERTH			
PANAMA			**JAMAICA**
AUGUST 2 ★ 11AM ★ MELBOURNE			
JAMAICA			**BRAZIL**
AUGUST 2 ★ 11AM ★ SYDNEY			
PANAMA			**FRANCE**

FINAL TABLE

		P	GD	PTS
1				
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4				

GROUP H

JULY 24 ★ 9.30AM ★ MELBOURNE			
GERMANY			**MOROCCO**
JULY 25 ★ 3AM ★ SYDNEY			
COLOMBIA			**SOUTH KOREA**
JULY 30 ★ 5.30AM ★ ADELAIDE			
SOUTH KOREA			**MOROCCO**
JULY 30 ★ 10.30AM ★ SYDNEY			
GERMANY			**COLOMBIA**
AUGUST 3 ★ 11AM ★ BRISBANE			
SOUTH KOREA			**GERMANY**
AUGUST 3 ★ 11AM ★ PERTH			
MOROCCO			**COLOMBIA**

FINAL TABLE

		P	GD	PTS
1				
2				
3				
4				

N'S WORLD CUP

LAY-OFF GAME 63

AM ★ BRISBANE

LOSERS GAME 62

SEMI-FINAL GAME 62

AUGUST 16 ★ 11AM ★ SYDNEY

WINNERS GAME 59 | | | WINNERS GAME 60

L GAME 64

AM ★ SYDNEY

WINNERS GAME 62

QUARTER-FINAL GAME 59

AUGUST 12 ★ 8AM ★ BRISBANE

WINNERS GAME 53 | | | WINNERS GAME 55

QUARTER-FINAL GAME 60

AUGUST 12 ★ 11.30AM ★ SYDNEY

WINNERS GAME 54 | | | WINNERS GAME 56

LAST 16 GAME 53

AUGUST 7 ★ 11.30AM ★ SYDNEY

WINNERS GROUP B | | | RUNNERS-UP GROUP D

LAST 16 GAME 54

AUGUST 7 ★ 8.30AM ★ BRISBANE

WINNERS GROUP D | | | RUNNERS-UP GROUP B

LAST 16 GAME 55

AUGUST 8 ★ 12PM ★ ADELAIDE

WINNERS GROUP F | | | RUNNERS-UP GROUP H

LAST 16 GAME 56

AUGUST 8 ★ 9AM ★ MELBOURNE

WINNERS GROUP H | | | RUNNERS-UP GROUP F

2023 ★ JULY 20-AUGUST 20 ★ AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND 2023 ★ JULY 20-AUGUST 20 ★

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